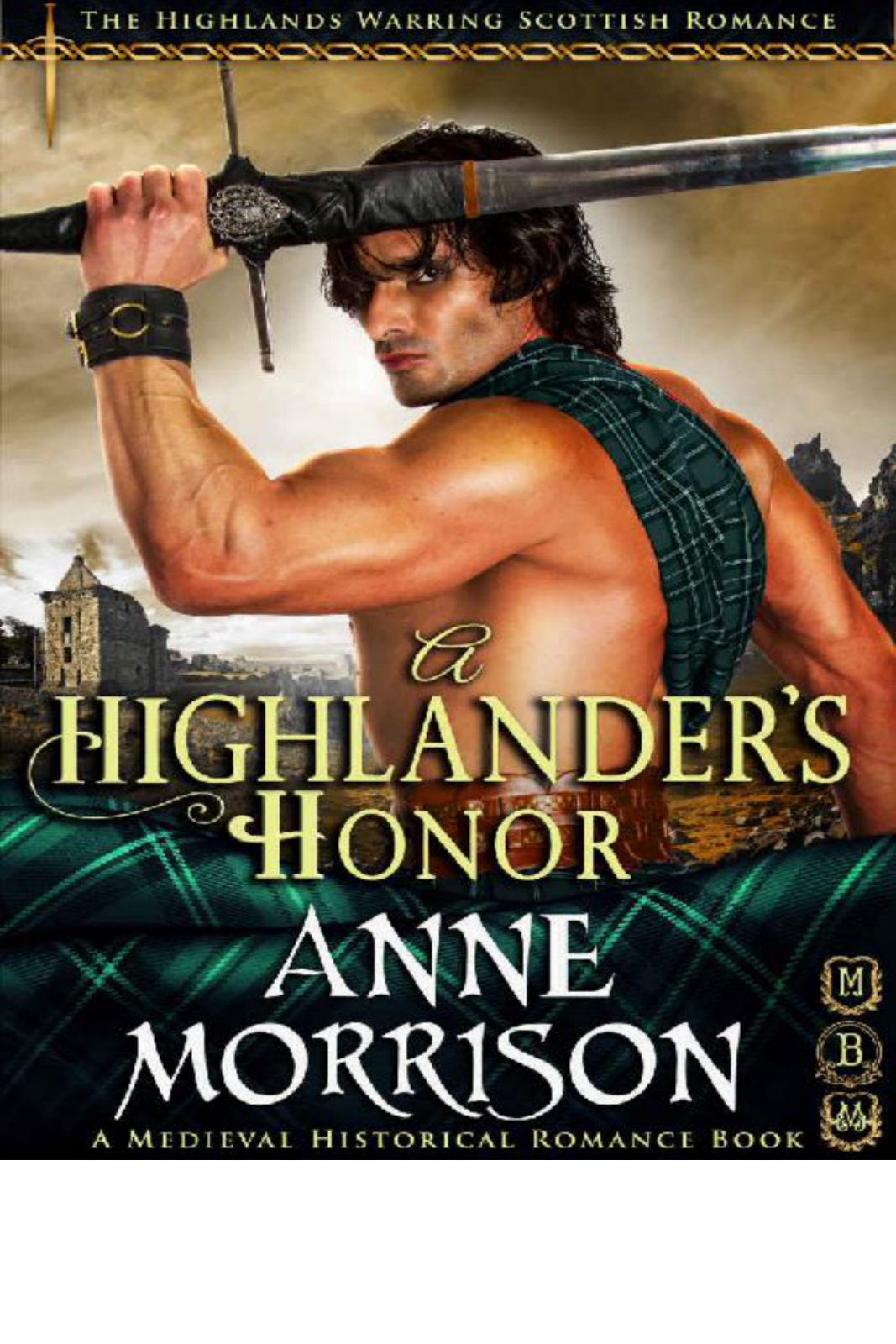


THE HIGHLANDS WARRING SCOTTISH ROMANCE



A
**HIGHLANDER'S
HONOR**

**ANNE
MORRISON**

A MEDIEVAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE BOOK



A HIGHLANDER'S HONOR

THE HIGHLANDS WARRING

SCOTTISH ROMANCE

A MEDIEVAL HISTORICAL ROMANCE BOOK

* * *

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MORRISON

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CHAPTER 1

[illegible]

May 1306

Near Glen Dorran, in the borderlands

The sounds of battle filled Sir Alec Trenton's ears, the red tide of a true battle rage threatening to fall over him. It had made him formidable in England's wars, both in the isles and aboard, but it was not necessary now. This was no battle, only a skirmish, and his men would take care of the raiders that had been scourging the countryside.

Some few weeks ago, he had been sent north looking for the Scottish raider, Lachlan MacTyr, the butcher who had been setting crofts to the torch and putting the innocent people who lived in them to the sword. What he had found was a land torn by war, just coming out of the winter, and people who desperately needed help he could not give. There had been no leads on Lachlan MacTyr either, not until they'd met a mercenary with a mysterious past and his woman.

Now said mercenary and woman were heading north, he had the raider's head in his bag, and even if he wasn't sure what the raider's name was, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the dead man was responsible for all the death on the border. It was hardly a

satisfying conclusion for him, though he guessed the mercenary and his lover had a better view of it all, but at the moment, the English knight hardly cared.

I am sick to death of all of this, he thought, riding back toward his men. The sounds of battle had died down, and a moment later, three short blasts of a brass horn rang out. The English signal, victory over the enemy. His band had triumphed again. He supposed it should have been a satisfying thing, but where was the satisfaction in killing off rats in the grain house? The raiders were used to taking on crofters who had never held a sword, men and women who farmed and raised sheep rather than warred.

Might as well send badgers after those vermin. Might as well send ratting dogs.

That was dangerous thinking for an English knight. The war for Scotland was one of Edward's priorities, and men who had hung back, men who had expressed dismay or suggested the English king's resources might have been better spent elsewhere, often found themselves in uncomfortable circumstances.

Put me back on the battlefield or let me go home. Though Alec barely knew where that was any longer. There was land for him in the south, and certainly, coin after his long service to the realm, but he also knew that he would barely recognize it when he came again.

While I'm wishing for things, I might as well ask for an end to this

war entirely.

He knew what a strange thing that was to want when he was riding with a man's head in a bag hanging off his saddle.

Alec's thoughts were dark, but then a harsh cry penetrated his haze. He straightened a little on his horse, slightly appalled that he had been riding so very carelessly. An enemy soldier could have attacked, and with stealth and luck, Alec might have died.

He strained his ears, listening, and the sound came again. A cry of fury and desperation. Alec turned his horse, a chill running down his spine.

It sounded like a woman.

It was slow going through the forest, especially off of the trails, but he pushed his horse as fast as he could go without risking a broken leg. The cry came yet again, louder now, and Alec winced.

He didn't tolerate his men abusing women, but it was a hard thing to enforce in times of war. He had hung a man for rape not so long ago without a single moment of regret, but he wouldn't be surprised if that hadn't dissuaded his other men. Men did things on the war trail they would never do at home, and it never seemed to sink in that the women they so abused were identical in nearly every way that mattered to their own wives, sisters, and daughters. Alec did not consider himself an angel, but some crimes, some *sins*, turned his

stomach.

He pushed his horse on, and after what seemed to take a very long time, they burst into a clearing, one that smelled of smoldering wood. The first thing he saw was a wooden caravan, one with the horses taken away and burning with a black and smoky fire. On the other side of the clearing...

Alec stared.

At first, he thought a woman and man were making love, the woman on top leaned over the man lovingly, and a small group of women huddled close by, watching with fearful looks on their faces. The entire thing was so strange that Alec froze for a moment, and then, when he came forward a short distance, he saw what was really happening.

The woman straddling the prone man wasn't making love to him. She was choking him with the chain that ran through the steel ring clamped around her wrist. She made savage snarling sounds as the man breathed his last, his face blue and swollen. Alec's first instinct was to tear her away and see if the man might be revived, but then he looked more closely at the women who were huddled close by.

There were a half dozen of them or so, dressed in rags that had once been clothing, and the look of fear and terror in their eyes, the dullness and lack of hope, struck him straight to the heart. One saw him looking and hurriedly glanced away. He guessed she was a girl of

some fourteen years, surely not more, perhaps significantly less, and his stomach turned.

He dismounted, approaching the scene carefully. He deliberately made no hurry to approach the young woman at her deadly work. If she proved to be weak and the man on the ground alive, he wouldn't be so for much longer. No one should be treated as this band of women were treated, and it wasn't as if the man's fellows were so lively anymore anyway.

As Alec approached, the man on the ground gave one last gurgle and then fell silent. So the girl had some strength, he thought, but that was before she raised her eyes to him.

She was as ragged and filthy as the other women on the chain, but no amount of dirt would disguise her fine features or the white flash of her teeth. She stared at him, and in that moment, Alec felt her bright gray-green eyes burn through him, seeing everything he was, everything he would be, all his strength and all of his weakness. There was no yielding in this woman at all, nothing that would break for him. It was like looking into the eyes of a wildcat caught at its prey, proud, defiant, and utterly without remorse.

Alec could see that her hands were still tight on the chain she had used to strangle the man underneath her. Every line in her body was tense, and he had the idea that any wrong move on his part would make her leap at him.

Alec knew she was no match for him. Her arms were already trembling with exhaustion, and deep lavender circles shadowed her extraordinary eyes. Still, he didn't grab for her. He realized that he did not want to hurt her or to allow her to hurt herself attacking him.

Instead, he showed her his sheathed sword, holding his hand well away from it. Her eyes flickered down to his sword and then up to his face again.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice rough and hoarse.

“I am Sir Alec Trenton,” he said, keeping his voice as calm and clear as he could. “I have come north hunting for the raider Lachlan MacTyr.”

The woman's lips peeled back from her teeth in an instinctive snarl, but then she stilled.

“And have you found him?” she asked, her voice shaking a little.

Alec hesitated. The ladies of England would be horrified by the savagery that he had to commit in times of war, but he was already beginning to learn that Scottish girls were made of sterner stuff. And English or Scottish, this girl had managed to kill one of her captors with the very chains they had given her. He did not think she was one for being shaken.

Alec nodded down at the bag on his hip, already stained with

blood from the grisly trophy inside.

“I have his head here.”

The girl went still, and for a moment, he wondered if he was wrong after all, and she was going to start weeping or wailing.

Instead, she looked at him unblinking, and for a moment, her eyes glimmered with tears.

“Safe?” she asked, her voice rasping.

“Yes,” Alec said, “I swear it. You are safe.”

She stood, stepping away from the body. She couldn't go far, however, because her wrist was still tethered to the other women, who were talking among themselves with hushed voices.

She looked as if she were going to say something, but then her eyes rolled up in her head and she pitched forward.

Alec dove forward to catch her, just barely preventing her from landing flat on the grass between them. She was surprisingly light in his arms, almost as if she were hollow-boned like a bird, and as his arms closed around her, Alec felt an unaccustomed ache in his heart.

Safe? she had asked him, and though he had sworn to her she was, he wondered how long he truly could keep her safe in this bloody land.

CHAPTER 2

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In her dreams, Marilee was at the keep on Mount Uaine. Sunlight was streaming through the window, and for once, the wool in her hand was behaving itself. She separated out the fibers, twisting them between finger and thumb before letting the thin yarn coil on her drop spindle.

“Oh you are getting better at that, aren't you?” asked her mother.

Marilee grinned at her mother, not wanting to give in to the squeak of pleasure she felt at the lady of the keep's rare praise. Marilee seemed to be a naturally indifferent weaver, but at her mother's insistence, she kept at it.

“It's a good color,” said Mary MacPherson. “Perhaps we can add it to your wedding chest if you keep it so even...”

Marilee started to agree, and then she jumped a little. She looked around. She looked at her mother's unlined face, so different from how

pale and still it was when Marilee had last seen it. She looked at her own hands, a woman's hands now, not the child's hands that her mother had held.

“Oh,” she said softly.

Her mother looked up.

“Why, dear, what's the matter? You look ill.”

“I'm not ill,” Marilee said, but before she could protest, her mother lifted her hand and touched Marilee's cheek gently. It was such a gentle touch, so perfect, so very much her mother that Marilee started to cry, wet tears streaming from her eyes and over her mother's fingers.

“Mama, oh, Mama,” Marilee said, her voice small and broken in her own ears.

“Why, lass, whatever's the matter? It's fine. It will be well, only tell me what is the matter?”

It would never be fine again, Marilee wanted to say. It had all gone wrong when they buried her mother all those years ago, leaving three broken hearts behind her, three people who had depended on Mary MacPherson to teach them how to love one another and how to care for one another.

“It won't,” Marilee murmured, and she knew that even if this was

really a dream, even if her mother was long dead, it at least meant that Mary MacPherson would never know what happened to her son, nor what her daughter would do to take revenge for it.

Marilee sat still, letting her mother's strong slender fingers card through her hair. It was a dream, but maybe it could go on a little longer, maybe it could...

From down in the courtyard of Lins Keep, however, there arose a clamor of voices. It had been a quiet day at the keep, but now, the peace was broken with something terrible, something that would change it all.

Mary jerked, rising to her feet, and then Marilee heard her father bellowing in the courtyard below, his voice full of rage and fury and grief. She had thought him broken when her mother died, but that was nothing compared to this.

“Why, what in the world?”

Her mother started for the door, but Marilee rose up, wrapping her arms around her mother and holding her.

“No,” she whispered. “No. Just stay with me. Stay with me a little longer. You never knew it in life, why should you know now?”

“Why, you silly girl, let me go, I need to see what the matter is...”

“No, you don't,” Marilee said, her voice breaking on a sob.

“Mama, you don't, you don't.”

Her mother turned to her, perhaps to scold, perhaps to argue, but Marilee never found out because suddenly she jerked awake, letting the dream fade with a pang of relief and regret.

She never knew. She never knew. It was all right. She was long gone by the time...

Then she came awake the rest of the way, sitting up in bed and looking around.

For the last two weeks, every awakening had been to the stinking nightmare of the caravan, where she had been kept with a half-dozen other women. The skin-crawling terror of her imprisonment had given way to anger and rage, and then to a kind of dull acceptance. While she had always been ready for a chance to escape, a chance to retaliate, Marilee had sunk into a kind of waking nightmare, where every day, every minute, every hour, was the same as the one that came before it.

Today was different, and she remembered what had happened. It had started like all the others, and then there was the fire, and the girl had helped them get out. Then...

Then I killed that man.

Marilee thought she should have felt something for killing her captor, some kind of horror or guilt, but there was nothing there. Only a kind of dull and vicious satisfaction for knowing that she had sent at least one of her tormentors to a greater judgment. She wasn't sorry, and in her heart, she knew that she never would be.

None of that explained where she was now. She was in a canvas tent, the flap open to bring in the last of the sunset. A pile of gear lay in the corner, armor and a great sword she knew she could no more lift than she could fly. She lay on a camp bed, one where the frame was held together by an intricate weaving of rope. Where the ropes crossed, they held up the thin mattress where she rested, a blanket thrown over her.

Blinking, Marilee looked down at her wrist where the manacle still sat, but the chain had been struck away. She fingered the sharp edge of the hasp that had once held the chain, and she remembered a tall blond man, his eyes as blue as the sky. He dismounted, his hands empty, and he had told her...

“You're awake. Good.”

She jumped, lurching to her feet and looking around for a weapon. There was none near to hand, and she bared her teeth, looking at that same blond man who now loomed in the opening of the tent, his face calm. Out of his armor, he was a little less fearsome, but his shoulders were broad, and his hips narrow, muscled like a

fighter and a rider had to be.

Handsome, whispered a soft voice in her mind, but she shrugged it aside, glaring at him.

“Why good?” she asked.

He smiled a little, still not moving from his spot.

“Because if it was much longer, we would start thinking that you would not wake at all, that the shock of... of all of it would have been too great for you.”

Marilee snorted.

“I have survived more than that, Sir Alec Trenton,” she said, her voice twisting around his name.

He looked startled that she had remembered his name, but he inclined his head graciously.

“You have my name. May I have yours?”

She tilted her head at his reasonable tone. Would he be reasonable about something else?

“I’ll tell you if you give me a weapon.”

She thought he might balk at that. The first time he had seen

her, she had been strangling a man to death, and that usually put men off on giving women weapons. Alec surprised her again by pulling a sheathed dagger from the bag hung off his shoulder.

“Here.”

She caught it as he threw it to her, and when she pulled the sheath off, the dagger proved to be a well-made thing, gleaming with leather wrapped around the handle and sleek with care.

“Will that serve?” he asked.

She nodded reluctantly.

“All right, My name is Marilee Ables of Clan MacPherson.”

The words were out of her lips before she could stop them, and dagger or not, she had not intended to tell him the truth. She cursed herself silently as he tilted his head to one side.

“MacPherson, like the MacPhersons of the North? Hard by Mount Uaine?”

She nodded. They were a large clan, and it seemed safe enough to stick as close to the truth as she could. The MacPhersons were no friends of the English, but then few of the Northern clans were.

Alec nodded thoughtfully, and then shrugged.

“You are armed. May I come in?”

She gave him a wary look.

“The dagger was for my name. What do you want to do in here?”

“Well, it's my tent,” he pointed out.

She blinked, because he was right.

“Oh... I should get out then.”

“Only if you wish. There's water here, for drinking and for washing.”

For almost anything else, Marilee would have edged around him and then bolted for the edge of camp. She was beginning to realize that she must be in the middle of an English encampment, hardly the best place for the daughter of some of the Bruce's most powerful supporters.

However, he had mentioned water, and it was what Marilee had dreamed of all the days she had been in that miserable caravan, water to drink, water to wash with, water to make her feel a little less like she was just a pile of rubbish that had been left on the side of the road.

“Water?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

Alec nodded.

“Here.”

He handed her a water bag, and she almost snatched it from him, tearing out the plug and squirting the water into her mouth. It was cold and fresh, and oh, saints in Heaven, but it tasted good, so very, very good...

“Slowly, slowly,” Alec murmured. “Slowly. You will make yourself ill if you are not careful.”

For a moment, she only wanted to drink faster because she was worried he would take it away from her, but reluctantly, she realized what good advice it was. She took a deep breath and took shallower sips, and a few moments more, she sighed and gave the bag back to him.

“Thank you,” she said.

The Englishman nodded.

“You are welcome. Here. I should bathe after a battle, but I'd imagine you could use it as well.”

From beyond the tent flap, he drew two buckets dripping with water into the tent.

“There. I can keep my back turned if you wish.”

Marilee was already reaching for one bucket, but then she paused.

“The other girls, what happened to them?”

“They're safe,” he said immediately. “I swear to you. They have a tent of their own, and I have two of my most trusted and reliable men watching over them. They will not be harmed.”

She searched his face, looking into his blue eyes, examining the slight quirk of his lips, the firm line of his jaw.

“You don't look much like a liar.”

He smiled a little at that.

“I try not to be.”

“So why was I kept apart?”

“Because you fainted. For a moment, I had thought you had some kind of attack or palpitation. I brought you here to see if it would help, and then when it turned out you were only in a faint, there seemed little reason to move you.”

Marilee nodded, because it sounded likely enough.

“I want to bathe,” she said at last. “but if you make the least move toward me, I swear, I will make you sorry. I will cut you open.”

To her surprise, Alec laughed at that.

“I should hope so. I didn't think you were enough of a fool to ask for a dagger that you could not use.”

For some reason, that made Marilee feel better, and she had to swallow back a smile before she spoke again.

“All right. Turn around, and stay where you are.”

Alec laughed at that, shaking his head.

“You are used to being in charge, aren't you? Are you a tavern girl, perhaps, or do you take charge of the other shepherd girls?”

“No, I’m just naturally aware that I have the best ideas,” Marilee said, fighting that urge to smile again. “So, will you?”

In response, he turned his back away from her and started to strip, removing his tunic to reveal broad shoulders and a back corded with muscle.

Oh... Oh, that's certainly...

Before she could embarrass herself with the next word, Marilee reached for the rag in her own bucket, trying to quell the blush that rose up on her cheeks.

[illegible]

CHAPTER 3

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Alec was male enough to wonder what Marilee looked like behind him. He had held her while one of the men struck off the chain of her manacle, and as the man had worked, he had spent some time inspecting his murderous new charge.

Marilee Ables was a pretty girl, slender with round hips, and a face of shocking prettiness hid under all the dirt and grime. Her eyelashes settled like a flutter of butterfly wings on her cheeks, and her lips were full, oddly kissable despite everything else.

He had to admit that he liked the way she had demanded her way when he had come into his own tent. It showed that she still had spirit, that she hadn't been broken by her ordeal with the bandits. He had spoken with the other girls briefly, the ones who hadn't skittered away as soon as he had shown up. He had heard about how they had been kidnapped and how the raiders had been going to sell them into slavery to the north and to the west. Once that happened, they would likely never see their homes again, and Alec knew that he wasn't going to feel the least guilt for the fate those men had met at the

hands of his war band.

Alec stripped to the skin with his back to Marilee. He had been a knight for almost all his life, and during Edward's reign, that meant that he had also been at war. His reflexes were good, he knew when he was being watched, and right now, he could feel Marilee's eyes on him.

“Ought you not be bathing?” he asked without looking around.

His quip was rewarded with a soft gasp and the sounds of splashing in the water. It was too easy to imagine her turning her eyes away from him and resolving not to look, though a girl with as much spirit as Marilee, he guessed that perhaps she would look again.

Alec shook his head at his own foolishness, reminding himself of what the girls in the caravan had been through.

If you think of her like that, you are going to be no better than the men who held her. Those girls were little more than slaves and chattel to those men. They deserve to be cared for and treated gently until they can be returned to their own people.

It was hard, however, to think about Marilee as a victim or as a slave. Killing was a brutal business whoever did it, man or woman, but he would never begrudge it to someone who had been put in Marilee's situation.

He was just resolving to keep his thoughts to himself when he heard her sigh. The soft and sensual sound made him freeze, and then it came again, followed by the sound of a rag being dunked in a water bucket and wrung out.

Alec swore in his head as his mind helpfully provided visions of Marilee running that damp rag over clean limbs, scrubbing down her skin until it glowed, naked just a few feet behind him.

Dear saints, how long has it been since I have had a woman that I should want some poor prisoner so?

The answer came back to him: too long.

Alec had never been one for making use of the camp followers and the other women who followed after the army. Some of the women actively sold their bodies, while others became something more or less like wives on the battle trail. Neither had ever appealed to him, and unless there was a stop in some town large enough for a brothel, Alec was usually content to go without.

But I don't want to go without right now. He shook his head hard, willing the interest stirring between his legs to cease. It took a short while, but he succeeded, and of course, that was when Marilee spoke, closer than he had thought, her voice softer than it had been.

“I... I don't want to put these clothes back on,” she said softly. “I know it's silly, but they're just so filthy. They smell like... they smell

like...”

“It’s fine,” Alec said, because he could very well imagine what they smelled like and why she might not want to put them back on.

“It’s fine. Do you see the bag next to my gear?”

“I do.”

“I have a spare tunic there. It’ll be ridiculous, but it will do until we can find you better. My men are going through the... the loot collected by the raiders. If they find some clothes, you can have them.”

“Thank you,” Marilee said, genuine gratitude in her voice. It was warmer than he would have thought, and he found himself wondering who she had been before she was taken. Something like that would change a person, and he hoped that whoever she was before that the terrible thing had not killed her outright.

He found himself listening, scrubbing the cloth over his body absently as she opened the bag and pulled out the tunic.

“All right,” she said. “You can turn around if you like.”

He did and stared.

Alec had thought that she would be rather pretty once cleaned—he hadn’t expected that she would be beautiful. Once scrubbed down, her skin was flawlessly smooth with just a small smatter of freckles

over her nose. Her gray-green eyes looked even brighter, and her lips were a sweet shade of pink, making her mouth look even more kissable.

The biggest change, he realized absently, was her hair. It had been twisted up and covered with a twist of cloth before, and now it had been washed and combed through with her fingers, falling around her face and down her back, a color that someone unimaginative might have called a reddish brown, but made him think of the sunset, studded with glints of garnet and gold.

She should have looked ridiculous in his tunic, dwarfed like a child in her father's things, but instead, there was something oddly sensual about it, about the way her neck and shoulders were revealed by the neckline, how he could see how long and strong her legs were.

Then he looked up and realized that she had her eyes closed and her lips pursed.

“What's the matter?” he asked, startled.

“You're naked,” she said. “You are completely and utterly naked.”

Ah. So he was. Alec couldn't stop himself from grinning just a little bit.

“Well, in all fairness, you are the one who told me to turn

around.”

“I clearly was not thinking. Obviously. I was so obviously not thinking.”

“Oh, do you not care for me?”

“I do not!” she said, but he couldn't help but notice a slight tint of pink to her cheeks, something more lively about her voice than there had been just a moment before.

“Are you sure? You seem as if you might be a little interested...”

“No!” she exclaimed. “Not at all. Please. Put your clothes on.”

“Well, you only had to tell me so,” he said, his voice only lightly shaded with amusement.

He turned back around, reaching for his clothes again. A part of him, a bigger part than he thought earlier, was more than a little reluctant to do so. That part of him wanted to stay naked with Marilee, to see what might come out of it, but he pulled it back. He might not be the spotless knight from the stories, the kind of heroes he had worshiped once upon a time, but he was not so degraded that he would assault a young woman who could barely stand to look at a naked man.

“All right,” he said. “I'm clothed.”

Marilee opened her eyes slowly, almost suspiciously, but then, when she saw that he was true to his word, she nodded with satisfaction.

“All right. Thank you.”

They stood in silence for a moment, and Alec realized that she was inspecting him just as he had inspected her.

“Well?” he asked after a moment.

“Well what?”

“How do I stack up?”

He had thought that she would blush and stammer a little over being put on the spot. It wasn't particularly kind of him, but something about Marilee made it impossible not to tease, not to hope he could send a little rush of heat to her face and make her maybe just a little flustered.

Alec had apparently misjudged her, however. Maybe she blushed a little at the beginning, but then she lifted her chin and looked him up and down even more obviously, as if she were a skilled horse drover, and he was a palfrey she was thinking of acquiring.

“Well, you certainly have good looks,” she said in an almost disapproving tone. “but so often good looks hide other faults.”

“I’m accounted a great fighter and a decent commander,” Alec commented. “If that does anything for you.”

“I’m not sure it does,” she mused, not looking up at him. “I mean, I am hardly one to pick fights...”

“No, you tend to win your fights on your own, don’t you?”

The words slipped out of Alec’s face before he could call them back, and her eyes flew up to his. Once they were out of his mouth, both of them were thinking about it, thinking about how she had killed that man with her own hands.

Stupid, Alec thought angrily. *Stupid and cruel and...*

Marilee took a step back, but instead of bursting into tears as he had expected her to do, she lifted her chin. In that moment, she looked like a young queen, proud even as her kingdom fell down around her.

“I do win my fights, Sir Alec Trenton of York,” she said proudly. “I think you had best remember that.”

Her strange speech sent a shiver down his spine.

This girl is more than she seems, whispered a soft voice in the back of his mind, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that voice was right.

“Who—?”

Before he could get the rest of that sentence out, there was a shuffle from the tent flap.

“Sir Knight, we have dresses from the loot, as you ordered.”

When he looked back at Marilee again, he realized she was only so hopeful for the dresses, as any girl would be who had gone through what she had.

Surely, he was wrong. Surely.

[illegible]

CHAPTER 4

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The dress Alec gave Marilee from the stack presented was finer than anything she had ever worn before, made out of sturdy linen of a fine and even weave and dyed to a smooth and lovely green. It was made in the Lowlands style, with lacing down the back rather than up the sides, and the shift that went with it was snowy white and seemingly lighter than air.

Marilee shook her head as she fingered the cloth.

“This can't be for me,” she murmured.

Alec smiled a little grimly.

“This was from the loot taken by the raiders who held you. You can be sure that the original owners are not going to come looking for it.”

Marilee shivered, because she knew he was right, and as he spoke quietly with the man at the tent flap, she retreated farther into the shelter with her prizes. When she glanced swiftly at Alec, she

could see that he was busy with his man, so she slipped his tunic over his head and pulled the shift over her head instead.

Saints, but how good it feels to be clean again, I feel more human. I feel like who I must be.

Thoughts of home, of why she was in the borderlands, came back to her, and with them came a surge of guilt. She hadn't thought of much while she was a captive, and she had not thought of Davy at all.

Davy, I am sorry. I will not forget again.

She shook her head. What was past was past, and she knew that better than most. It was time to move forward.

She pulled the green dress over her head as well. The dress had been lightly laced, loose enough for her pull it on. Now, she took hold of the lace at the nape of her neck and tugged, feeling the dress tighten around her. There was something oddly sensual about it compared to the dresses she was accustomed to, who only laced up the sides, and would not tighten in this way. She could feel how the dress was meant to fit, could see how it would even fit well, if the truth were told, but for some reason, she could not get it tied.

The slippery lace slid against her fingers, making her grunt with irritation, and every time she thought she had figured out how to knot the thing and hold the dress to her, she found that she was wrong, and

it slipped loose again.

Marilee's arms ached, her fingers ached, and when she heard a soft laugh from the English knight, she turned toward him with just a touch of murder in her eyes.

“If you are so accustomed to laughing at women in a trial...”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Here, let me help.”

She took a quick step back, but then she realized that he had made no move to approach her. He was waiting for her to give him permission to do so, and that small courtesy made her chest tighten a little.

It is only decent that he should do so. It is what any decent person would do. I have only spent too much time with people who don't care about anyone's will but their own.

“You won't touch me?” she asked warily. “No tricks, no sly little gropes?”

For just a moment, anger bloomed in his bright blue eyes. It made Marilee think about the heart of a blacksmith's frame, where the fire was the hottest, almost white with the heat necessary to forge swords and plows alike. Then that flame was put out with regret and understanding, and Alec nodded.

“I won't. I'm sorry you have to ask me that, and I hope the world

treats you more kindly than it has.”

“I have had no real indication that it wishes to do so,” she said, but still, she turned her back to Alec, feeling a prickle of vulnerability as she did so. Belatedly, she pulled her loose hair over her shoulder, baring the laces to him a little more.

It is only because I need the help. I simply do not wish to have my clothes sagging off of me. That is the only reason for this.

It was true, but she still bit back a startled cry when she felt him come up behind her. It truly was a rich woman's dress, something that would have been hard to fasten on her own. A tiny part of her realized the humor of a knight like Alec playing lady's maid, but then she felt the brush of his calloused fingers against her nape.

“Oh!”

Alec pulled back immediately, and she knew that if she turned around, she would catch him in an expression of concern.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt somewhere I didn't see?”

“No,” she said, making her voice low and gruff. “You only startled me. Keep going. I can't be falling out of my dress, you know.”

Alec's laugh was soft, and something about it made her drew her breath silently in surprise. What kind of reaction was this man drawing from her, she wondered, and what could it mean?

Then his fingers were at her nape again, and to her surprise, she felt him tugging the laces tight, evening the edges of the gown so they fit to one another and pulling the laces tight as he did so. He tied the knot neatly and quickly, and then... then he stood still, still close, close enough that if she leaned back only a little, she could touch him.

I want to.

The thought came to her, and it was so strange, so startling, that it made her gasp.

“Are you all right?” he asked, and this time, his voice was slightly husky. She could almost feel his eyes on her nape, feel the ghost of his fingers there as well.

“I am,” she said. “Only startled you are so fast.”

“I’m not so unused to women’s clothing,” he said. “How it comes together, how it comes apart.”

“Braggart,” Marilee said accusingly.

He laughed again.

“Useful braggart at the moment. Does it feel right?”

Oh, yes. Then she realized with a blush that he was talking about the dress.

“It does. Thank you.”

She turned, expecting him to take a step back, but he didn't, and suddenly, they were so close she had to look up at him, could take in the strong cut of his jaw, the line of his neck, the breadth of his shoulders.

Not just handsome. She didn't know if there was a word for what she felt for him, how just looking at him made her heart beat a little faster.

“Alec...” she said softly.

“I do like the way you say my name,” he murmured, and slowly, so slowly, he raised his hand. She realized in a dim kind of way that he was giving her a chance to step back, to say no, but it didn't matter because there was no sign of protest in her mind or in her heart.

Marilee trembled when he brushed a stray damp strand of hair back from her face. The gentle brush of his fingers was enough to send a kind of expectant tingle through her body, to make her want to lean in toward him.

What would it be like to have more than that? How would it feel to have more?

Marilee swallowed, and Alec's eyes flickered down to her throat, and then up again to her lips...

CHAPTER 5

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There was absolutely no telling what would have happened next if there hadn't been footsteps outside his tent, followed by a querying, “Sir Knight?”

Alec's first instinct was to roar at the poor man like a lion defending its kill, and that thought woke him up enough that he took two steps back, staring at the woman standing in front of him. In the space of a heartbeat, he looked past her beauty, the way her chest rose and fell, the pink blush of her cheeks.

This woman had been held captive in a hellish wagon for weeks. She had killed her captor to get free, she had been willing to fight like few men would to earn her freedom, and here he was, pushing at her like the worst kind of blaggard in a tavern, the one who assumed that, of course, all the barmaids wanted him, that, of course, his jokes and his advances would be welcomed. He had known plenty of men like that in England and on the border, and he had always held them in contempt.

I'm a fool and possibly a lecher. Turning away from Marilee, he stalked toward the tent flap. He must have looked furious, because the man blanched a little, but in the end, Alec was grateful to him and the petty matter that needed Alec's attention, something about where the horses were stabled.

If he hadn't come to interrupt us, there is no telling what would have happened. What I would have done to her.

Alec liked to think he was a decent man. He was an honorable fighter when he could be. He did not hurt those who offered him no hurt. He was stern with his men and kept them in line. In the moment when he had faced Marilee, however, he had known that in some essential way, it was all a lie.

The things he wanted to do with her were things he should do with no woman who had been through what she had been through. In that moment, he hadn't been thinking about her pain or what she needed. He would have taken her, and he didn't like to think about what it might have taken to stop him.

When the soldier who had interrupted them went off to deal with the horses, Alec took a moment, scrubbing his hands over his face roughly, willing the strange heat that had fallen over him to dissipate. How in the world could he trust himself to lead men like this, let alone be close to Marilee?

Instead of returning to the tent, he walked toward the smell of

cooking food. His band had been pushing hard for a few weeks now on the trail of the raider MacTyr, and they had come to a relatively safe place. At least, it was rendered safe by the fact that they were likely the worst things in the area, and that was as safe as things were likely to get in the battle season on the border. They could rest for a few days.

The raiders they had killed had had food and plenty of it. Now his own men were cooking it, and the women they had freed were falling upon it like starved wolves. They looked up fearfully as he passed by, but he could already see the fear wearing away as they realized they had fallen into safe hands.

I should set someone to asking where they came from and whether we can help them get back somehow. He picked up a platter and loaded it with bread, cheese, and sausage. He took the wooden platter back to his own tent and paused for a moment before opening the flap.

For the love of Heaven and all the saints, be kind to her. Hasn't she suffered monsters enough?

Alec wasn't sure what he had expected when he returned to his tent. He might have guessed that Marilee would be back in a corner, pulled away from him, or furious, perhaps. Instead, she perched neatly on his bed, running his own wooden comb through her long damp hair.

"I was wondering where you had gotten to," she said, and her

calm voice made Alec grin in relief.

All right. You have a second chance. Don't fumble it. Don't hurt her.

“Running a war band is not unlike keeping watch over children sometimes,” he said. “Everyone needs a decision made for them, and they need it immediately. When I was done, I thought that you might be hungry.”

Her eyes lit up at the mention of food, and she set the comb aside to braid up her hair neatly, tying it with a bit of leather lace he recognized from his own kit.

“You went through my things,” he said.

She gave him a sly look.

“You were gone too long. What else was I supposed to do?”

“Wait until I got back and asked?”

“No, that doesn't sound like me at all. Are you going to share the food you brought, or are you only going to eat it while staring at me?”

Alec laughed at her pert words, shaking his head.

“If you found my comb and that lace, you were in my purse. That's where I keep my coin. Did you help yourself to that as well? If you did, I'm going to ask you to pay for the food.”

“I am not a thief,” Marilee said with dignity. “I was merely being independent and avoiding having to ask you for every little thing. A knight like you, with so many responsibilities, should thank me for showing that kind of initiative.”

“All right, I'm not going to whip you for going spying,” Alec said, pulling out a stool so he could sit beside her.

He grinned when he heard her mutter, “*I should like to see you try.*”

He set the platter next to her and gave her a cautionary look.

“Slowly, like with the water. You will make yourself sick if you eat too quickly.”

Marilee looked at him with mock exasperation.

“If you are so worried about me doing it wrong, you should feed me too.”

Alec shrugged and tore off a bite of the bread, cutting a sliver of cheese to press against it. Marilee stared, looking as if she wasn't certain what was happening, and then he held it to her lips.

“Here, open,” he said, his voice a little lower than it was before, a little warmer. He thought she would bite at him and take the morsel from his hand, but then she dipped her head, taking the bite into her mouth.

Alec stared as her pink lips opened, taking the food from him. There was something terribly striking about it. Seated on the bed, she was positioned over him slightly. On the low stool, his eyes were perhaps a little below hers, like a suppliant's might be. She sat with her back perfectly straight and her hands folded in her lap. It occurred to him that at some point, someone had taught her some manners.

It's like the knights from the stories begging their ladies for favors, he thought, preparing another bite for her. She took the second mouthful as well, and then she laughed a little.

“You can't think to feed me all of my dinner like this,” she said, but Alec wondered if there was something trembling in her voice, something almost yearning about it.

“I would. If you wanted me to,” he said, and this time, he was certain that he did see some kind of tremor go through her, something that hinted at some deeper response in her.

“No. That is, I... No. Don't be silly. Here. Let's both eat.”

Alec felt a strange pang of loss as he sat back with a slight smile and a shrug.

“As my lady wishes.”

Marilee actually flinched at those words, her eyes flying to him with startled worry. For a moment, he thought she might actually try

to rise and run, but then she calmed, giving him a dark look.

“Don't call me that,” she said, her voice hoarse and her eyes intent. “Please. If you... if you care for me at all, don't.”

Alec's heart ached at that even as he nodded.

"Of course. Forgive me, please."

She nodded, the wariness fading from her eyes, and Alec cursed the men who had taken her, who had given her those flinches and that fear in her eyes. He hoped that someday that fear would go away, that it could be smoothed over and banished with better memories.

He didn't know what to do with the idea that he might be the one to help her banish them.

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CHAPTER 6

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You are better than this, Marilee told herself. *If this is all the more clever you can be with an actual English knight, you should just go home and tend some sheep.*

She and Alec ate in silence, and throughout the meal, she could sense him looking at her, watching her with a hunter's intent. She didn't think he had figured her out from that one slip, but surely, he must suspect her of something after that outburst.

It wasn't until he was so gentle with her after the meal, asking her if she was all right with him so close, clearly telling her when he might brush against her or touch her, that she realized what he thought.

He thinks that MacTyr's men abused me. He thinks he's dealing with a despoiled maiden.

The risk had been there, certainly. She was no innocent in the ways of men and women and how brutal men could be when there

was no civility to keep them in check. In some ways, the Highlands were no different from England when it came to how roughly men could treat a woman on her own, and if the raiders had actually gotten her to the coast, her life would have become a living nightmare as soon as they got the money they wanted in exchange for her.

However, the raiders, no matter how brutal, knew the value of the women they were carting across the world would be higher if the women were comparatively untouched. It hadn't prevented everything. It hadn't meant that they were inviolable, but it was a kind of protection.

Of course, Alec didn't know that.

Marilee's first instinct was to tell him the truth, but after a moment, she realized that she would have been a fool to do so. She had only spent a short time with Alec, but she knew that he was possessed of more restraint than most men, some honor, and some concern for those weaker than he was. It was what an English knight was supposed to be, according to the stories, but she knew those stories were only pretty flights of fancy most of the time. Alec seemed to be a rarer case, something real and true.

That means that he will think me far more fragile than I am. He'll trust me more, underestimate me. I can't lose that advantage when I have nothing besides a pretty dress to my name.

After they ate, Alec rose to his feet.

“You’ve only been in my tent because we were worried that you had some kind of fit earlier. The other women have been given a tent of their own in the center of camp. I would think that you would be happier staying with them.”

Marilee knew that she would not. In Alec’s tent, she was close to his coin, close to his weapons, and also close to the edge of camp. Her escape became far less sure and far less profitable if she went with the other women, if she had to make her way through the camp when she did make her escape.

“Actually,” she said quietly, “could I stay here?”

A shadow flickered across Alec’s face and sent an unexpected pang through her heart.

“You will not be molested,” he said. “My men are kept under strict discipline, and most of them have nothing but contempt for what happened to you and the others.”

“I know, I know,” Marilee said, her voice faltering and her mind moving fast. She had never been skilled at batting her eyelashes and twisting men around her fingers, but apparently, that was what needed to happen right now.

“But?”

“But... I feel safe here,” she said, looking up at Alec through her

eyelashes. “With you. When you left to get the food, I was a little nervous. I felt... oh, I don't know, I felt nervous. Afraid.”

She almost choked on that, because she was Old Laird MacPherson's daughter. She came from a long line of Highlanders with nerves as hard as Mount Uaine itself, and fear, both her parents always said, was nothing but one more slope to climb, one more enemy to defeat.

As embarrassing as it was, however, it made Alec soften immensely, and he nodded.

“I can understand that. If you stay here, however, there is only my bed to sleep in with me. Are you all right with that?”

Marilee almost pushed her luck, wondered if she could convince him to sleep on the ground next to her, but she knew that was hardly something that a shy and nervous maiden would say.

“If... if you promise not to—”

“Saints above, Marilee, I would never,” he said, but she caught something guilty chase across his features.

It should have made her worry, should have made her scrap the plan entirely, but instead, it only made her heart beat faster.

Well, if he wants something from me, he will be easier to manipulate, won't he?

That was what she told herself, but a warm pulse at the center of her said something else, something she absolutely did not have the ability to figure out at this time.

She nodded instead.

“All right. I'll sleep in the bed with you, only please don't make me go.”

Alec gave her a look that made her ache in a way she didn't understand, and he nodded.

“I won't.”

* * *

Of course, then she actually had to sleep in his bed with him, and somehow, despite knowing what that entailed, she was startled by how very close it brought him. He was a big man, as big as some of the Northerners she had met on the coast, and the bed was not so terribly large. In her shift, she watched him strip to his trousers alone, and he caught her staring.

“Change your mind?” he asked, a slight smile on his face, as if he had expected no better from her.

“No,” she said, remembering not to speak so proudly at the last minute. “Only tired.”

He nodded at that, and to her relief, he lay down on the side of the bed closest to the canvas wall, on his side to give her a little more room. Then there was nothing to do but to climb into bed next to him, and as the ropes underneath them creaked, she rolled toward him, making a soft startled noise.

“It's all right,” Alec murmured, drawing a blanket over them. “It's all right. I won't hurt you. But the bed being what it is, we're hardly going to get away without touching throughout the night.”

“I knew that,” Marilee said defensively, though, in all honesty, she hadn't been thinking of it.

She also wasn't thinking about how it would feel when her body settled against Alec's, her back to his chest, one arm thrown over her waist as if they had slept that way for years. She hadn't thought of how very good it would feel to have his breath against her ear or to feel his hand smoothing her hair down.

“Sleep well, Marilee,” he said, his voice soft against her ear. “All of this will be over soon.”

Actually, I'm afraid it's just starting...

She actually did sleep for a short while, a restless sleep, but thankfully, one without dreams. It felt as if her body was absorbing all the care she could give it, because while the past few weeks had been hard, it would likely be nothing compared to the weeks that would

When she woke up, it was pitch black in the tent, but she waited patiently. Davy had once told her that short of being in a cave under the earth, few places were simply black. Light came from the moon and the stars, leaking through the canvas, through the gaps between the walls and the ceiling, the walls, and the floor. Soon enough, Marilee could make out the shape of Alec's gear, the place where the tent flap must be,

For a moment, all she could feel was a strange sense of
igness over that, but then she told herself that was fine. It would
r easier to leave without rousing him like this, and she swung her
over the edge of the bed, slipping on her dress and tying it as best
ould without him.

Then she made her way toward his gear and the purse she had been investigating earlier.

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something in him howling for her. It wasn't sane or sensible, and the longer he lay there in the dark with her body hard against his, the more he realized he couldn't trust himself with her.

His mind was full of images of caressing her body, of cupping her breasts through her shift and then underneath it. He thought of nuzzling her lovely neck, of lapping gently at her earlobe. He thought of her fear and pain turning to something sweet instead, something that would make her reach for him, make her welcome him and his touch and the pleasure he could bring her.

Do you even need that? Alec climbed carefully out of the bed, dressing and leaving the tent. Are you sure you wouldn't mind if you terrified her? If she cried out and begged for you to stop? Because that is what would happen.

The only men awake were the watch set at either end of the camp, and he dismissed the one to the north, sending him to his bed. There was no reason for both of them to be kept from their beds.

He paced along the tree line, letting his eyes get used to the starlight, thinking about Marilee and his own shameful lack of self-control.

I need to find a woman. I need to find someone I can spend this desire with, someone who I won't hurt.

Unbidden came thoughts that he wouldn't hurt Marilee, that he

would never, ever hurt her. He only wanted to make her feel good, to show her that it did not have to be a terror or a pain.

You won't convince her of it. Not waking her from a dead sleep, touching her in the dark like some kind of monster.

He tried to rid his mind of her eyes after he had tied the lace of her dress. She had looked up at him with something that made him ache, and in that moment, he had known it was not fear, not at all. Instead, it was the same kind of heat he felt in his own body, reflected back in her green eyes, and he knew in a flash he had never wanted anything more.

Shut up. Wait until you're back in England. Find a whore, a woman who knows what she wants and will not ask more of you. Leave Marilee alone.

He took a deep breath. At the end of the day, he was responsible for his own actions, no matter who he could find or not.

The night calmed Alec somewhat. The moon was almost full, and a summer warmth had started to creep back into the darkness. The winter had been a bad one, and the summer might prove a scorcher, but this was fine. The men were guessing the cold winter and cool spring might mean a long and hot battle season. Alec was an excellent fighter. He didn't relish it, but there was a simplicity to it. Survive. Kill anyone who was trying to kill him. It was better than hunting bandits, no matter what rewards Edward would give him after he returned

with MacTyr's head.

His thoughts were busy with battle plans and soldiers when he saw a movement along the edge of camp. For a moment, he thought it was only a young deer drifting too close to the fires of men, but then the figure straightened, and he saw that it was a person, someone slight and cloaked.

There shouldn't be anyone out in this direction. He started to call out, but then the figure started its way down the slope toward the road, and he walked faster.

He was just a dozen yards behind the cloaked figure when he kicked a rock. He thought they might turn, but then the figure took flight, moving faster than Alec could believe.

“Stop!” he cried, all pretense of stealth gone, and he darted after them.

He might have lost them if they darted into the woods, but in this darkness, in this forest, that was surely asking for a broken ankle or worse. Instead, the figure pelted for the road, and Alec ran after them.

He realized quickly that they were faster than he was, and if he could not finish this in short order, they would make their escape. Alec was built for war, not for speed. Instead, he did the only thing he could do, which was lunge forward to catch the figure in a flying

tackle, bearing them to the ground with his weight.

They both hit the soft grass with a jarring thud, and he smiled grimly as the figure twisted underneath him. They almost escaped but then he took a firmer grip, searching and finding an arm that was far thinner than his own.

“Stop, you're done,” he snarled, but the figure only fought harder. With a murmured curse, Alec wrapped his hand around their arm and started dragging them back to camp, where now men were stirring. He dragged the figure to a torch, and he stared at the face that was revealed.

The fall had split Marilee's lip, put a scrape on her fair brow, but it was unmistakably her.

There was a moment, one that embarrassed Alec when he reflected upon it later, where he was convinced this was some kind of mistake. She had been going for some kind of walk. He had frightened her.

Then a flash of something hard and vicious crossed her face, something that belonged to a wildcat and not to a terrified croft girl, and Alec realized that he could not lie to himself any longer, not and still do what he needed to do.

“I... I'm so sorry, I was... I was just out...”

“Shut up.”

At the ice-cold tone in Alec's voice, Marilee's mouth clamped shut. A part of him noted that a frail girl might have burst into tears at that moment, but Marilee's eyes, though wide, were dry and careful instead, watching him to see what he might do.

Who are you? Alec shoved away the odd hurt welling up in his heart.

Instead, he thrust aside her cloak, taking in the pouch, his purse, that had been belted to her narrow waist. When he took it from her, he found that, of course, it was heavy with his coin, and now he saw that his narrow short sword was tucked into her belt as well.

Some of his men were stirring from their beds, coming out to see the commotion. He roared for them to go back to their places, and he dragged Marilee to his own tent. After an initial moment of resistance, she came along easily. He wondered sardonically if she thought it might fool him into thinking that she was just a nervous and fearful girl again.

He pushed her into the tent ahead of him, and she turned to face him, her chin up even as she shook. For a moment, Alec wanted nothing more than to shake her, to demand why she had tried to rob him and sneak off into the night.

A moment later, he realized that nothing would come of

CHAPTER 8

[illegible]

It didn't take long before Marilee's arms and legs started to complain, and not long after that, that discomfort turned to pain, then to a raw and red fire. She lay on Alec's bed as the minutes and hours ticked past, and she gritted her teeth against it. She wouldn't scream. She wouldn't cry; she refused to give in.

Almost worse than the pain was the realization that she had almost gotten away, that she had almost made off with her loot and her plan for revenge in front of her. Now, she would likely be hung as a thief, and that would be the end of that.

Her own death should have frightened her, but instead, all she could think of was Davy, who hadn't been offered anything so easy as a hanging at the end.

Oh, Davy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I wanted to do better by you...

Slow tears flowed from her eyes, and she did her best to blink them back. She refused to go to her own death sniveling as if she were

sorry. She was a MacPherson, and she refused.

The inside of the tent was just beginning to lighten when Alec returned. From her position, she could only see him from the waist down, and for a moment, he only stood at the edge of the bed, looking down her. She wondered whether his face was wreathed with contempt or hatred, if he was confused or simply disgusted with her and his own foolishness.

She half-expected him to spit on her. Instead, he reached for her hands, untying her with gentle fingers. Her arms and legs had gone numb, and when the ropes were released, she almost screamed. The blood returned with a rush, and unbidden tears came to her eyes.

No, no, this isn't how I wanted this...

She couldn't move with her limbs tingling so painfully, but instead of being angry, Alec sat on the stool by the bed and rubbed her arms and her legs gently. At first, she thought it was some kind of strange torture, as his touch burned, but then she realized he was hastening the relief.

“Why?” she croaked, her voice nothing more than a whisper.

At first, she thought he wouldn't answer her, and then he spoke, his voice not much louder than hers.

“Because as angry as I was at you, I should not have tied you like

this. It was not my intent to cause you pain.”

“I didn't want to cause you pain either.”

The pause between them felt very weighted. Through the haze of pain, Marilee could feel Alec turning her words over in his mind as if they were some leather or a knife he was thinking of buying. In the end, she could almost feel him turn away.

“It doesn't matter, you didn't,” he said, his voice almost brisk. “Can you walk now?”

“Of course, I can,” Marilee responded, but then her feet hit the floor.

The feeling of pins and needles roared up again, so vivid that it was like pain, and Marilee bit back a hard cry as she went tumbling toward the ground. She winced because she knew that she would land very hard, but then Alec's hands were on her, putting her back on the bed and kneeling down beside her.

He swore, low and inventively in what she thought was the harsh northern tongue, and then she made a soft noise as he reached for her foot.

“Can you feel this?”

She started to ask him what he meant, but then she let out a silvery gasp as he ran a sharp nail over the sole of her foot.

“Oh! What in the world?”

“Good. And here?”

She bit her lips against the ticklish sensation he was provoking in her as he ran his nail over her soles and then along each wiggling toe. It took almost everything she had not to laugh out loud, and she knew he was purposefully ignoring the whimpers that sneaked between her tightly-shut lips.

“All right,” Alec said finally, setting her foot down again. “No permanent damage. I hadn't thought there would be, but... one never knows.”

She was shocked to see the look of remorse and guilt on his face. She had fallen into a numb kind of stupor in the hours she had been tied in his bed. Now she felt a strange bit of hope.

“This is an awful lot of trouble to go through just to hang me,” she ventured.

Alec gave Marilee a grim look.

“I am not going to hang you.”

The words flooded her with a cold relief, enough to block out the strange and niggling feeling at the back of her head. Something afoot here meant nothing good for her, but she was still relieved to not be executed.

“Thank you,” Marilee murmured. “Thank you. I’ll leave immediately, I’ll... you won’t see me again.”

For some reason, those words left her curiously hollow and lost. Marilee told herself it was only because she had been so confined for the last few months and Alec was the first safety she had found since her imprisonment.

Another week, another few days, and I will likely be as right as rain. I was fine before, and I will be fine again.

Alec, however, scowled at her, shaking his head.

“You are still hiding something.”

“Everyone is,” she retorted, but then her hand flew to her mouth in shock. What was wrong with her? She was better than this. She always had been. How in the world had she lost the ability to keep track of what she was saying to this man?

Alec smiled at her grimly, nodding acknowledgment at her lapse.

“Tell me what you’re hiding.”

Marilee looked at him, searching his handsome face for any sign of mercy or quarter, and she found none.

“I’m not what you think I am.”

He nodded and waited for her to continue. She concentrated on the tingling feeling of life returning to her hands and feet, and she took a deep breath.

“I'm a whore,” she said, refusing to let a red blush rise up on her face. “The other girls, they were honest maidens taken from their places. I was a Scottish noble's mistress, and I was taken as I strayed close to the market.”

Something in Alec's eyes burned at the mention of her as some Highlander's woman, but it was all to the better. If he were disgusted by her, he would surely let her go on her way, wouldn't he?

“I need to return to my lord,” she continued. “I'm a secret from all his family, but he might tear the countryside apart for me. I must return to him, and he would not like to know that I'm with an English knight.”

“What's his name?” Alec asked, and for a moment, Marilee's mind was blank. Then she remembered a name and nodded.

“Malcolm MacBride of Clan MacBride. He's related to Laird MacBride.”

Alec gazed at her, and she met his gaze steadily. She had met Malcolm MacBride a few years ago. He was a fearsome fighter but had no land or money of note. There would be no use in hurting her to get to him.

“Try again,” Alec said.

“What?”

“I met Malcolm MacBride just a short while ago, and I met his wife as well.”

Her stomach sank, but she lifted her chin.

“Married men have mistresses.”

“Not that one. Not with the woman he had with him. She was a beauty, you know, not some liar from a slaver's cart.”

Marilee flinched a little at the cruelty in Alec's words, startled that they had hurt her, furious that they should do so. She glared at Alec, and he gave her a mockingly courteous nod.

“All right. So you are not Malcolm MacBride's mistress. Who are you then?”

She glared at him, and the brief smile on his face faded, leaving his face hard and cold.

“All right. If you will not tell me anything but lies, it is time to find some other way to get you to talk, I think.”

He reached to her hip, retrieving his dagger and pulling it out of its sheath. She stared at him, watching the morning light glint over

CHAPTER 9

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Alec was startled by how it felt to have Marilee in his arms, clinging to him. He had thought it would feel different after he knew her to be false, but a pang went through his body. She was only clinging to him because she could walk only with difficulty and pain. She only clung so she would not fall. Something about how she felt next to him, however, refused to let him think about it.

He shook off the soft feelings as best he could, because they would not serve him. If Marilee was a mercenary and cold creature, than he needed to be doubly so.

A small voice in his head was telling him he could still back away from this. Nothing so far said he had to do anything with the bewitching young Highland girl at all. He could simply let her go and think no more on it, if anyone could forget Marilee after she had entered their life. It would be something strange to remember, and then she would be gone.

However, Alec was a hunter. He was a knight, of course, and a

fighter, but underneath that, ever since he started tracking deer with the castle dogs as a child, he had been a hunter. Part of that was knowing when there was something to hunt, and right now, all of his instincts were bright and shouting. He could no more back away than he could make the sun move backward in the sky.

He ignored the inquisitive eyes of his men as he went by with the girl in his arms. He did not stop until he came to the young women who had been on the same chain as Marilee when they found them. The women were gathered around a fire, eating and resting. He could see the signs of their captivity in the manacles that still hung on their wrists, in the shadows in their eyes, but he could see some healing as well. Instead of skittering away from him, they only watched him and Marilee warily.

He came to a stop in front of them, gazing from face to face.

“I am Sir Alec Trenton of York,” he said, his voice coming out a low rumble. “I need to know who this woman in my arms is. Who she truly is.”

One girl no older than fifteen or so, held up her hand nervously.

“That is Marilee, my lord,” she said hesitantly, like a child fearful of giving an answer that was too obvious.

“She is a liar and a thief,” Alec said sternly. “She has lied about everything to me, and now I want to know who she really is.”

The women exchanged a look among them. He guessed their captivity had kept them close, but it was over now. Still, none of them wanted to betray the others.

“She told us her name was Marilee,” one of the other women said with a shrug. “We didn't get to talk much, my lord.”

Alec nodded.

“I understand.”

He did. People bonded in times of adversity. They became close, and then anyone who came in later, no matter the good he was trying to do, was an interloper. He couldn't blame them for that. It only meant that he would have to push a little harder.

With care, he set Marilee down on a log close to the fire. She looked tense, her eyes more pale than dark in that moment. What a strange and witchy thing her eyes were, and how beautiful.

“Tell me what your name is, and tell me who you are,” he demanded.

She glanced quickly at the women seated close by and shook her head.

“I told you before; it's Marilee Ables.”

“It is not. Very well. Let us see if you can be convinced.”

He drew the dagger from a sheath in his belt, flipping it so it tumbled hand over hand in the air, landing comfortably back in his hand. He looked over the women seated in front of him, and finally, he grabbed the girl who had spoken first, the young one. He took her by the arm and grabbed her up close to him, swinging her away so that his body was between her and Marilee.

“Tell me who you are,” he said, his voice still calm.

“I... I told you.”

He pressed the edge of his dagger against the girl's throat, just letting her feel the cold edge.

“Cry out,” he murmured, and she uttered a small and frightened gasp.

“Well?” he said, turning his head back to Marilee.

She looked stricken.

“I...”

Not fast enough. He lowered his head to put his mouth next to the frightened girl's ear.

“Scream. Now. Or I will make it real.”

He wouldn't have. He wasn't a monster, but apparently, the girl

and Marilee thought he was. The girl shrieked as if the fires of the underworld were coming for her, and Marilee howled, like she was in actual physical pain.

“NO! No stop, don't hurt her, don't!”

Marilee stumbled up and took a few tottering steps. She made it a short distance, but then her feet gave up, dumping her on the ground. Still, she tried to crawl toward him, her eyes wide and pale, her hand up in entreaty.

“Tell me,” Alec said, staring down at her with a subtle sense of shock in his heart.

She might have been a liar, but right now, he felt as if he could look straight down into her, into her heart and soul. There was nothing terrible there and no evil at all. Instead, there was something so bright, so beautiful, that he had to have it no matter what, and that longing was surely no good thing.

“I'm Marilee MacPherson of Clan MacPherson,” she said desperately. “I'm Laird MacPherson's daughter, born of his marriage with Morwen of Clan MacDonald. I am the sister of Clan MacPherson's former war leader, David MacPherson. That is who I am. Please. Please don't hurt her any longer.”

Alec let the young girl go, and she darted to Marilee's side. Alec thought she went to help the fallen girl up, but instead, Marilee took

her into her arms, cradling her head for a moment as she glared at Alec.

“There you are, love,” she murmured to the girl. “There you are, let me see...”

Alec stood silently while Marilee inspected the girl's throat, and then looked her over with increasing confusion.

“Where is—?”

He wanted to tell her again that he was not a monster. He wasn't. He might be savage in times of war. He might be a ruthless killer, but that was only toward people who were trying to kill him.

There was no way he would use a young and blameless girl to get information, not even if the cause was dire.

Marilee shushed the unhurt girl and handed her back to the women. Alec watched as she climbed slowly to her feet. He could see how much it hurt her to do so, but he knew that in that moment, there would be no way in the world that he could convince her to take his hand.

“Marilee MacPherson, we have a great deal to speak about.”

Her eyes flashed like lightning, and she inclined her head with all the regal dignity of a queen.

“Sir Knight, I think we must do.”

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CHAPTER 10

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Back in his tent, Marilee couldn't call back a soft sigh when she sat down on his bed again, lifting her feet off the hard ground. They looked worse than ever in the light, still swollen with the bruises from the ropes turned dark and ugly. Her hands were better, but whenever she moved them in an unexpected way, they complained.

“That was a dirty trick,” she told Alec coldly.

He shrugged.

“Still a better one than actually hurting her. What are you doing this far south?”

She was silent, giving him a dark glare. After he had helped her back to the tent, he had kept his distance. Marilee didn't think he was afraid, however. It was only that he wanted to watch her, wanted to figure her out like some sort of strange animal.

“Is your family nearby? The MacPhersons command a large warband for Robert, but they wouldn't send their daughter, would

they?”

She watched him, her mouth shut.

“Are you alone?”

“Of course, I am.”

He regarded her curiously.

“She speaks. And I do not think it is a lie.”

“It isn't,” she said shortly. “I am alone. I am at your mercy.”

For some reason, saying those words sent a flicker of heat through her. She wondered what it would mean to be at the mercy of a man like Alec, to give herself over to him, not to resist him at all.

Alec looked displeased with her pronouncement.

“You are.”

“What then, are you going to do with me?”

Her words came out huskier than she had thought they would, and Alec's eyes lit with blue fire. She could see the hunger he kept carefully restrained and concealed, the hunter's need to chase, the knight's need to conquer. Suddenly, all of that need was focused on her, and she nearly gasped at the power of it.

Then it was gone, and Alec was glaring at her. Undaunted, she glared right back. She was not to blame for his viciousness or his stubbornness either.

“Madame, I will bring you south to the court of King Edward. You are the daughter of a notorious Scottish rebel—”

“Warrior! We are not rebels!”

“You are the daughter of a war leader, and therefore in my custody. You are a hostage to the Crown. You will be taken to the king until such time as you are ransomed back to your home, no matter how long it takes.”

She knew how long it would take—some cases went on for years. Some never ended, and the hostages died a great long way from home.

Her first thought was of despair, in the south and surrounded by her enemies, but then a second thought rose up. It would bring her closer to Lord Branford. That was the only thing that mattered.

She took a breath. She took another and another. She was aware of Alec's eyes on her, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered but her mission, so long derailed, but now actually moving again.

“I accept my place as your hostage,” she said, her chin up and her voice cold. “I trust that you will not treat me badly?”

His eyes flickered to her hands and feet, and the moment of self-

loathing she saw then stunned her. She had lived her life surrounded by men who did what they had to do. Not a single one of them would have pulled back from restraining an enemy, but something in Alec made him regret what had happened between them. She wondered if that was something she could use later on.

“I will treat you well so long as you obey me. No escapes. No stirring trouble among my men. You will stay with me, close to me, until I have brought you in front of Edward.”

She nodded. She had no intention of running away, not when he was offering her a protected route that would take her toward her goal.

They stood in silence for a moment, watching each other warily. Marilee ached for the sweetness they had shared before, but she was smart enough to know it was a lie, a lie that she had helped create. There was no reason for her to be so bereft over it now that it was over.

“I am going to fetch some food for us,” he said. “Things will be better after we’ve both had some food and possibly some more sleep. We are going to be on the march again tomorrow.”

She nodded. There was some relief in being alone in the tent again, and at the same time, she didn’t want him to leave. At some point, she had realized she wanted him close, as utterly mad and strange as that was. He was her enemy, in almost every way that

mattered.

He started to leave, and then he paused at the tent flap. She looked up, curious to see that he didn't turn back toward her.

“You said earlier that you were the sister of David MacPherson.”

Nothing had prepared her for the sharp and piercing pain of hearing her beloved brother's name on this man's lips, in his hard accent, without the love that she was used to hearing it.

Marilee swallowed hard, took a moment to make sure that she wouldn't stutter when she responded.

“Yes. He was my brother.”

A pause, and she thought that Alec was looking for the right words while realizing that in a very real way, they were simply not there to be found.

“I faced your brother on a field of combat once or twice,” he said finally. “The English knew him as a fine fighter and an honorable one. I am sorry for what happened to him.”

He left then, and Marilee was grateful. She didn't want him to see her weep, to see the tears that welled up helplessly in her eyes or the sob that shook her entire body.

She had thought she was past this stage, but now she knew in

her heart she wasn't. The wound left by what had happened to her brother was still open, still raw, and all it took to open it up again was a kind word.

If I keep crying, I will cry forever.

She refused to let herself lie down in the bed. She refused to allow herself to bury her face in the blankets.

The world's coming. The voice in her head sounded remarkably like her mother's. *That means that you must be ready to meet it.*

Instead, she sat in the quiet tent and waited.

* * *

A silence fell over Marilee and Alec as the day drew to a close. He hadn't spoken to her much beyond the necessities, but she didn't get the idea that he was ignoring her either, shunning her out of some kind of steaming rage. Instead, he had simply made her a part of his environment, moving around her with an easy courtesy that startled her.

The day was meant to be a rest day before the band moved south toward English-dominated lands. Alec spent it speaking with his men in front of the tent, and when he wasn't doing that, he went through the exacting task of examining his gear and checking it for weaknesses or need of repair. She flinched a little when he drew his sword, but he

only wanted to clean and oil the blade.

He gave her a slight and oddly sad smile at that.

“I told you I wasn't going to hurt you.”

“It only surprised me. I know you won't hurt me.”

“Do you?”

She took a deep breath. She told herself they were going to be together for at least a few weeks as they went south. It was better not to make an enemy.

“I will try to know it,” she said, because it was the truth as skillfully as she could tell it. She realized in a strange sort of way that she did not want to lie to him.

The smile he flashed her was as quick as a bolt of lightning, and it sent a strange heat through her body. There was something about the way Alec looked at her, and something about the way she felt when she looked at him that made her shiver in a way she had never anticipated before.

“Thank you,” he said, and somehow, Marilee knew he meant it honestly. “That is all I can ask for.”

For some reason, that statement allowed a small amount of hope to open up in Marilee's heart. It wasn't a lot. It wasn't something

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CHAPTER 11

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Alec thought they were doing fairly well until night came.

Marilee was as quiet as a stone as he went about his day, but every so often, he would look up and find her watching him with a cool and assessing eye. It should have bothered him more, but there was something comforting about it, something easy and almost soothing. It made him think of the cats that lurked in barns all over the isles, occasionally coming close to the fires to take a scrap of food or more rarely, a gentle scratch behind the ears.

I wonder if I could reach over and stroke her. The thought filled him with some amusement, and then he was a little startled by how very good that sounded.

Marilee had braided her hair back and thrown the plait over her shoulders, but it still gleamed like a sunset river. He felt some kind of primal urge in him to stroke his hand down its sleek length, to run his fingers through it.

However, he also knew that she had been truthful when she said she would try to trust him, and the last thing he wanted to do was to ruin that. So he ignored her, keeping his hands to himself, and when she turned slightly so he could see the elegant curve of her neck, he told himself it wasn't for him.

He was congratulating himself for a job well done when night fell, the camp sounds quieted, and she turned toward him with a proud tilt to her shoulders.

“And where will you be sleeping?”

Alec gave her a skeptical look.

“In my bed. Where else?”

“And where will I be sleeping?”

“In my bed as well. We did it last night, and you woke up with what was left of your virtue intact.”

He cursed his own sharp tongue when she flinched back from that. No matter what she had been trying to do, it was no reason to be cruel.

She looked lost for a moment, and then she shook her head.

“Things are different now, as surely you must know.”

Alec snorted.

“I know nothing of the sort, but all right. Things are different. I have learned that more than just being a lost young woman, you are the daughter of a powerful Scottish noble. I have learned that you are clever and you are not above running away with my goods when you think I am not paying attention. What that means, madame, is that I will not be letting you out of my grasp.”

She glared at him.

Alec shrugged.

“I suppose I could tie you again.”

After the pain she had suffered, the pain she was likely still feeling at least a little, he thought that threat would surely have made her pull back. She was only a maiden, and that type of pain and harsh treatment should have put her off any kind of disobedience.

To Alec's surprise, however, she only watched him for a short moment, and then her face split in a narrow smile.

“You won't tie me again.”

He glared at her. She was right, but he hardly wanted her to know that.

“Are you so very sure?”

“Yes. You're too honorable for that, aren't you?”

“Perhaps you should not mock the honor of the man who rules you until you come to the south,” he growled.

She shrugged.

“It is true. You will not tie me like that again. And you will not leave me alone to sleep, and you will keep me with you. What does this mean?”

“It means,” said Alec, losing his patience, “that you are sleeping in my bed with me, and that you are not going to be any the worse for it. I swear it on my honor as an English knight.”

She studied him for another moment, and he wondered how in the world he had ever thought her a wide-eyed innocent. She may have been a slight young woman, but there was something canny in her gaze, something cool and assessing. If he hadn't been very lucky, he realized there was a good chance she would be miles away already, with his purse and on who knew what kind of mission.

“All right,” she said, and she turned her back to him. “Unlace me, then.”

Alec uttered a short bark of laughter, but he came behind her to do as she said.

“One moment you think I cannot keep my hands off of you for

my bestial English urges, and the next, you are giving me your back and the closures to your dress. Are you a little mad thing after all?"

"I wanted your promise again," she said softly, and something Alec ached at that.

"My promise?" he asked gruffly.

"That you would not harm me. I wanted to remind you. And I wanted to remind myself."

It was true. He would stake his sword on it, and it made him ache. Whoever she was, no matter what kind of scheme she was involved in, she had seen more than a young woman should have of the brutality of men on the border.

"I won't," he said, loosening the last of the lacing. "And there. You are free."

She glanced over her shoulder at him, a twisted little smile on her face. He wanted to lean in and kiss her, and he had to take a step back before he lost whatever scrap of honor he still possessed in the process.

"I am not, but thank you," she said.

The bed was no larger than it had been the night before, Marilee moved restlessly against him, but she made no further protests. Instead, she settled into his arms as if she had been made to be there.

After an uncomfortable moment, she stretched her arm over his chest, coming even closer.

They did not bid each other goodnight, but Alec could tell when she drifted off, her entire frame relaxing against his, her breathing going slow and soft. It wasn't a sensual pleasure, but somehow upon hearing that, he relaxed as well. Tentatively, he reached up to stroke her hair, smoothing the heavy strands back from her face and closing his own eyes.

Alec's dreams were fractured things, broken and full of blood. It happened to him sometimes in the early summer, when the battle season was roaring to a start all around him. The death to come woke up the death that lurked inside him, and when he woke up, he was grateful to do so.

When Alec opened his eyes, he was at first only aware of the soft, warm, female body pressed against his, of the dawn light that filled the air and a feeling of startling well-being. He watched Marilee with a kind of strange contentment, staying still even as her dark lashes fluttered, opening to reveal her eyes. They were a pale green this morning, all the gray drained out somehow, and in that moment, before they both remembered that they were enemies and she his captive, they only stared at each other in surprise, in shock and pleasure.

Marilee pushed herself up on one elbow, and then Alec couldn't

resist the urge to pull her closer, half-sprawling over his chest.

“Oh...” she murmured softly, and then he kissed her.

He could feel a little stiffness at first, more surprise than anything else, but then she softened against him, pressing her small lush body against his as he deepened the kiss.

He couldn't believe how good she tasted. He couldn't believe how good she *felt*. She felt almost fragile in his arms, but there was a tensile strength to her as well, something that made him want to roll her under him, push her into the mattress and explore her even more thoroughly.

The heat of her body was incredible, and the more he kissed her, the more aware he became that the only thing keeping him from her was her shift, a thin layer of linen that allowed him to feel her curves straight through it.

She was beautiful, but it would not have been enough to drive him out of his head if it had not been for the almost unnatural heat that coursed between them.

The moment his lips touched hers, the moment he drank in her surprised gasp, the heat between them exploded, passing from her body to his and then back again. It was so good, so terribly good, and it scoured him, changed him in some elemental way that he couldn't quite understand. It set a deep and wild fire to him that he realized

after a moment was hunger.

He needed her, and now that he knew it, nothing would be the same.

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CHAPTER 12

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Marilee knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what a bad idea this was. It was foolishness, pure foolishness. Alec might have been an honorable man as far as the English went, but there was honor and then there was being provoked. What she was doing with him now, that was provocation.

The initial kiss hadn't been her fault. It had taken her by surprise, and honestly, it had seemed to take him by surprise as well. One moment, they had been looking at each other in the dawn light, and in the next, she had been half-sprawled over him, exploring his mouth just as he explored hers, waking that strange fire deep inside her.

I could do this forever. That hazy thought woke her up a little.

No. No, I can't. What is this?

Marilee gasped, pulling back to look at him. He looked almost as shocked as she felt, and she couldn't help but notice how red his

mouth had become. She wondered if hers were as red, and her hand came up to touch her sensitive lips without thought.

“Marilee,” he murmured, his voice soft. “I’m sorry, I...”

Suddenly, she didn't want to hear his sorry. She didn't want to hear him say how much he regretted this or how wrong it was. There was plenty wrong between them, starting with the manacles still around her wrists to the fact that he knew who she really was.

Marilee didn't want to think about any of that, so instead, she leaned up, pressing her hands down on his shoulders and pushing him down to the mattress again.

This time the kiss was hers, and she went after it with a kind of wildness that felt right, as if it had been growing in her soul for a very long time. Her teeth clashed against his, her tongue thrust into his mouth, and all she felt was a wild and desperate need that started somewhere in her core and then swelled out through her body.

I need you, I need you, chanted a voice in her head, but she had no idea what it meant. How in the world could she need an English knight who was holding her captive?

The hunger she had found for Alec would not be denied, and it was only halted because he was the one who pushed her back.

“Marilee,” he said, his voice low and harsh. “You can’t. If you

keep going, I will not be able to stop.”

For a single moment, a brief and desperate second, she didn't care. She didn't care about anything else in the world but kissing Alec and driving him to do whatever it was he was threatening. She couldn't bear to pull apart from him, from the first relief or pleasure she had felt in so very long.

Then she remembered her real mission. She wasn't some captive girl, no matter how much easier it would have been to be one. She was a woman with a mission of revenge, and she could not allow herself to forget it.

She drew a deep breath into her lungs, nodded and pushed away. When she did, she could feel Alec shake a little, pulling away in his turn. She could tell that it cost him something to swing his legs over the edge of the bed and to stand, shoving his tunic on hastily and keeping his back turned to her.

“It's time to start breaking down camp,” he said gruffly. “Can I trust you stay in one place while I do so?”

Marilee licked her lips where she could still taste him just a little, and then she was glad when he wasn't looking her way.

“I will stay here. It will be fine.”

Alec didn't turn toward her, belting on his sword.

“I will not be kind to you if I catch you straying after you have given me your word.”

Marilee stiffened at that, sitting up in the bed with the blanket around her shoulder. He knew she was a noble. Her word was good, and the query came through her head again: *does he think all Highlanders are without honor? Without dignity?*

“I give you my word,” she said, her voice as cold as the deepest snows of Mount Uaine. “And you are bearing me to your king like some kind of prisoner taken at war. There is nothing kind about what you are doing.”

Alec flinched, and then he nodded.

“As you will, madame.”

Then he was gone, and she was alone in the tent, wondering, after all, what in the world had happened.

Marilee wondered if it was some kind of trick, some sort of strange way to weaken her defenses and keep her docile, but it seemed too convoluted for Alec and, if she were honest, too devious. No, what they had felt between them was genuine, and now she had to figure out what to do with it.

The answer came back: *nothing*.

I am going south to avenge my brother. Nothing else matters.

A few hours later, Alec returned, tied her dress for her, and led her out of the tent as his men brought it down. She was relieved to see the grisly trophy of MacTyr's head had been handed off to one of his men. She had hated the man while he was alive, but she had no interest in staying close to his corpse now that he was dead.

Before they set off, however, Alec had to deal with the women who had been liberated from the wagon with her. She watched in surprise as he gave them a small amount of coin apiece from his purse, and then set two mounted me to guide them back to Glen Dorren, which was a short distance to the west.

“I would keep them with us, but we are headed south, and Glen Dorren will bring them closer to where they started from.”

“I had not expected you to give them coin,” she said.

He shrugged, almost looking embarrassed.

“They will need something to get those manacles off. And the money was meant to cover incidentals as I traveled north.”

“And Edward will reward you well when you return with news of MacTyr's defeat.”

“Yes,” Alec said after a beat, and it puzzled Marilee until she realized that hadn't been thinking of it at all. It wasn't as if the knight

had made a solid calculation on what money he could spare. He had simply given it to them without thought.

The women set off but not before descending on Marilee to hug her close. There were some tears, and Marilee felt herself come close to crying as well.

“We can get word back to your father,” said Ainsley softly. “I have people in Dun Corren...”

“No, not that,” Marilee whispered. “As you love me, not that.”

Ainsley gave her a confused look, but she nodded. Marilee understood that the woman was doing her a good turn, but it would be worse than disastrous if her father got word of her predicament.

After all... he has no more interest in this world.

The dark thought struck her like a hammer. It always did, and like always, she had to push it away before she could get on with everything else.

When the women were on their way, Alec brought her over to a tall broad-boned gelding, a gleaming chestnut with a deep chest, a white blaze on his nose and four white socks.

“Good looking,” she said.

Alec shot her a wry look.

“Thank you.”

“I didn't mean you,” she said, a hot blush coming up on her cheeks, and he laughed.

“He's a little spirited, but he's big enough to carry the both of us south. Are you afraid of horses?”

“No,” she said with some asperity. “I'm not some shy English miss.”

“No,” he echoed. “Come here, let me lift you up.”

She gave him a scornful look, stepping around him, and offering her hand to the gelding. She was wary, because she could tell immediately that this was a battle mount, but the gentleness in his eyes meant he would not be much trouble. She was rewarded with a gentle whuffing sound and the feel of soft whiskers over her palm.

“Aye, aye, darling. I'm sorry I have no treats for you. Maybe another time, yes?”

When she thought the gelding had understood her well enough, she stood on tiptoe and hauled herself onto his back by the saddle horn. He was the tallest horse she had ever sat on, and it probably would have served her right for her pride if he had dumped her on her rear, but the chestnut stood as still as a stump until she was well-mounted.

CHAPTER 13

[illegible]

The day passed quickly, all things being equal.

They were still in contested territory, and that meant that at nearly any time, they might be challenged by Highland soldiers, by one of the independent but still hostile clans, by raiders from both sides. It was one of the reasons why Alec had insisted on keeping his warband small, in order to move more quickly through the borderlands. It meant that they were perhaps more vulnerable than they could have been to the raiders, but it also meant they could move very quickly if they had need to.

The day took them south, along a track they had been along once before, however, and there was a good chance the warming weather had sent most people to their crofts. The men who were inclined to fight had likely sought places in their respective armies now.

If they were very lucky, it would be a quiet time to Colchester and from there, the journey south would be quieter still.

Throughout the day, Marilee was a quiet weight behind him. She had a good seat, moving as he did and as the gelding did, and she could keep it without clinging to his waist, though perhaps he would not mind if she had clung to his waist a little more. Sometimes, it was easy to forget she wasn't there, but then the next moment, he felt her pressed against him, heard her breathe, and then he was unable to ignore her at all.

This one has gotten into my blood.

It didn't matter. She was going to be Edward's hostage in just a few weeks. That meant she would likely be locked up in a tower, given some sewing to keep her busy and left to stay there until she could be used for some kind of advantage or another, whether it was to secure more funds for the war or the return of some of Edward's men.

The thought of it, however, made Alec bristle. It *did not please him* that he was giving her to someone else, even if that someone else was none other than his own king. The sudden surge of anger brought a possessive sort of fury, and he had to concentrate on pushing it down deep inside him before he could do much of anything else.

“What's the matter?”

The soft voice from behind him helped nothing at all, and Alec almost ignored her before he realized how very rude that would have been.

“Nothing,” he said gruffly, “Why do you ask?”

“Hm. You went all stiff suddenly. As if you suspected someone in the trees or on the road ahead.”

“No. And do not worry. You will be protected no matter what.”

“Because I am such a valuable hostage, yes.”

The faint sting of humor to her words made him want to kick and snort like the chestnut would have done. Instead, he only scowled before he remembered that she could not see him.

“Because you are with us not out of your own free will, and therefore, you are under my protection,” he said shortly.

For some reason, that made her laugh a little.

“Am I meant to thank you for that? For protecting me from danger that I would not be in without you and your decision to make me a captive?”

Alec snorted at that, even if he could somewhat see her point.

“You were held captive by slavers when my men rescued you. Trouble walks tall in this land, and it does not pause to see who you are with.”

“As a matter of fact, you found me killing my biggest problem

when you arrived,” she said, her voice calm, and this time, Alec did turn his head to look at her. Her eyes were a deep and lovely green, and it was almost easy to forget how savage her words had been.

“Does it disturb you?” she asked curiously. “I understand that women in the Lowlands are never taught to bear weapons or to act at all in their own defense.”

Alec shrugged uncomfortably.

“They have no need to. Their men defend them.”

“Ah, their men,” she said, her voice light. “Their fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands. How many of those fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands have ended up as little more than grist for Robert and Edward's war?”

“Enough,” he said. “You know nothing of the war.”

“I'm the sister of David MacPherson,” she said, her voice sharp. “I think I may know something of it, Sir Knight.”

Alec took a deep breath, because it wasn't as if she was saying anything he hadn't thought himself. If Englishwomen were taught to defend themselves as their Scottish sisters were, it would set many minds at ease.

“You're right,” he said finally. “Forgive me.”

She stilled at that, and he thought that she went to place her hand on his waist before thinking better of it.

“You’re forgiven,” she said, surprise in her soft words.

They rode all day, and that night, they pitched only a quick camp under the pines. There was no real effort to get a true rest or to eat anything but the supplies they carried. Now that they had what they wanted, they should get back to the south as soon as they could. It was a punishing pace, but the sooner they were out of the raiders’ favorite territory, the better it would likely be for everyone.

Alec had thought that Marilee would complain about the pace, the lack of sleep, and the poor food, but she did neither. Instead, she stayed close to him, she slept and ate when he did, and otherwise, she only looked around her with those bright eyes. He heard more than one man call her gaze witchy, as if she might put a curse on them, and he made sure to keep her even closer. He kept his men in line, but he knew better than most did how that control might snap, and how even if he regained it almost immediately, a great deal of damage might be done before he could help it.

So they rode toward Colchester, three days and two nights, and on the evening of the third day, Alec breathed a sigh of relief to see proper houses appear. Colchester was a Scottish town, ruled over by Scottish officials, but as such things went on the border, they were friendly enough to Englishmen, so long as they did not wave banners

or set to put in their own rulers. It was safe enough, and Alec wasn't coming to put anyone to the sword.

Instead, he went into the inn, purchasing all the room they had with the largest room for himself and Marilee and telling them to empty the kitchen for his men. Then he was free to go get Marilee and bring her indoors. Something about leading her into a comfortable bedroom with a neatly banked fire on the hearth and a tray of food close by the large bed made his heart twist a little, especially when she looked around with an almost astonished relief.

“Mercy, but I had almost forgotten how good it is to be indoors,” she said.

“You're a lady,” he said. “You should be treated as such, shouldn't you?”

She laughed a little at that, and the sound sent a trill of pleasure down his back. He had not heard her laugh before this, he realized, and it was a surprisingly soft and bright sound, like bells or the singing of birds in spring.

“I think you have underestimated the difference between a lady in Scotland and a lady in England,” she said a little wryly. “However, I'm not so much of a fool to turn this down. Only...”

“Only what?”

CHAPTER 14

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Marilee walked from one end of the room to the other, relishing the pleasure and luxury of being alone for just a little while. She had gotten almost as much privacy as she liked at home, but she hadn't been alone in weeks not since...

Not since I was captured.

She put the thought out of her head, because when she actually had a roof over her head and a fire and food, she didn't want the darkness of the previous weeks to come and fill her thoughts. She told herself things were going according to plan, that there was nothing to worry about. Tonight... tonight she could simply not think.

She jumped a little at the knock on the door, but instead of Alec, it was only the inn boys, coming up with a tin tub and buckets of steaming water for her bath. She let them fill it for her, and then with a groan of satisfaction that was surely more than a little sinful, she stripped and sunk into the water. At home, she swam in the pond every day it wasn't iced over, at least for a few minutes, and she was

not the only one. She had missed the water, and this warmth was luxurious.

She scrubbed every inch of herself and on impulse, she washed her hair as well, wetting it to the roots and wishing she had some of the sudsy pounded root that they used at Mount Uaine to strip out even more dirt and grime. It was the best she could do, however, and after she was done, she couldn't resist staying in the cooling water, letting her eyes drift closed.

The door opened, and Marilee yelped in surprise, but it was only Alec, staring for a moment before he closed and latched the door behind him.

“You should remember to latch the door,” he said mildly, only a slight quiver in his voice. “Anyone could have come in.”

“Anyone did,” she said, but there was no sharpness to her voice. Despite his position as her captor, she was feeling surprisingly soft toward him for the moment. He had gotten her a bath, after all.

“I'm not anyone,” he said, and she noted that his hair was dark with water and his skin scrubbed.

“Where have you been?”

“There's a rain barrel around back. There's also a blacksmith nearby.”

He tapped meaningfully on her wrist, where an iron manacle still hung.

“We can get that taken care of for you.”

Marilee looked down at the iron with a wry expression.

“Sometimes I forget it is still there, and then I look down, and...”

She shook her head. She didn't want to tell him that sometimes, it could take her right to the worst days in the caravan, when the wailing of the other girls threatened to drive her crazy, and when she knew, she simply *knew* that there was no future for her besides being some Northerner's thrall.

“We can get it taken care of in the morning,” Alec promised, and somehow, she knew that he had understood regardless of what she said or did not say.

She nodded and abruptly realized she was naked in the water. She glanced at Alec, who wasn't looking at her, thankfully, but her clothes were across the room.

“Are you ready to get out?” he asked.

She sighed in gratitude.

“Yes. But, um. The towel...”

“Ah, here. They brought it and left it on the chair...”

The towel was only a large rectangle of fabric, scrubbed clean and pale after so many uses, but it would cover her. To her surprise, however, Alec held it open for her instead of handing it to her.

“It's all right,” he said with a slight quirk to his lips. “I won't look.”

What if... what if I wanted you to do so? What would you think?

The words shocked her silent, but when Alec held the towel out, she stepped into it without a sound of protest, letting him wrap it around her shoulders. She thought surely he would let her go then, but instead, he started to dry her, rubbing her briskly with the towel.

“Oh, I can...”

She trailed off as she realized how good it felt. His hands were gentle, but the feeling of being taken care of was immense, and it almost drew a cry from her lips before she closed her mouth.

“It's fine,” Alec said, his voice clipped. It was almost harsh, but when she turned her head to look at him over her shoulder, she found his blue eyes were dark with something she couldn't name, his lips drawn into a tight line.

“Alec?”

He didn't respond, and so she turned in his arms. The towel was still snugly wrapped around her, but suddenly, she was very aware that there was nothing at all between the two of them besides a thin layer of cloth. She could feel the heat of his hands through the cloth, and something about the heat from his eyes made it feel like nothing at all.

“Alec, have I made you angry?”

His laugh was short and hard, but desperate, too, sending a surge of heat through her belly, making her press her thighs tightly together.

“Far from it,” he murmured. “You're beautiful. I want to touch you in a way that I should not.”

“Why shouldn't you?”

She suddenly remembered climbing a very tall tree, and the taller she climbed, the more fragile the branches became, and the more likely it was she would fall to the hard ground below. This felt just like that, seeing how high she could go. How high she dared.

“Because you are noble. Because you are for the king. Because you have been hurt before, and I cannot even promise that I wouldn't hurt you as well.”

The way he said it made her heart beat faster, made her lips part

CHAPTER 15

[illegible]

Marilee had no idea what to expect. She knew the mechanics of the act of love, of course. She knew that more often than not, it was an act performed for the benefit of the man, for his pleasure and, as some of the older women had told her, for his pleasure alone.

The problem was, however, that those things had nothing to do with what she felt when Alec touched her. When he kissed her. Whenever they so much as brushed fingertips, all of those words about male gratification and the pain and irritation that women bore in bed flew right out of her head. It didn't make sense, not when the brush of his lips across hers made her entire body yearn toward his, when it sent a surge of need through her that felt more like flying than any earthly thing.

Marilee clung to him, as they came to the bed, burying her face in the crook of his neck and murmuring a little. Alec paused, and she could feel him trembling. For some reason, that tore at her heart, making her whimper.

“Have you changed your mind?” he asked, and she could hear what it cost to ask him that.

“No, but... please....”

Marilee could feel her face heat up. She had always prided herself on maintaining control over herself and the world she lived in. She had always known what she wanted, and right now, she felt as if she had been cut adrift in a sea with no stars. She half-expected Alec to snap at her, to demand to know what she was trying to say, but instead, he stood like an oak tree, apparently ready to stand like that forever if that was what it took.

“Don't... don't be rough with me,” she muttered. “Please. I couldn't take it from you.”

She gasped as he hugged her tight, almost too tight to be comfortable. His lips moved against her hair as he said,

“No, never. I never want to hurt you, darling. I couldn't stand it.”

“All right. I believe you.”

The words were small and soft, but they made Alec thrum with pleasure.

“Believe me, yes, believe me, and I will make you feel so good, darling, for trusting me.”

He lay her down on the bed, and then, before she knew what he was about, he took hold of her shift and lifted it clean over her head, stripping it from her body entirely. Her eyes went wide and a small cry escaped her lips. Before she could raise her hands to cover herself, however, Alec took her wrists with their manacles still on in his hands, lifting them and pinning them gently over her head.

“No,” he said. “There is no reason to cover yourself in front of me. There is nothing that you have to be ashamed of, I promise.”

“I'm not ashamed,” Marilee protested, “only unused to... to this.”

“Well, by all means, we shall have you become accustomed,” he purred, and then, fully clothed, he went down to kneel over her.

There was something different about the way he kissed her now, the difference between the swift and concentrated motions of a hunt and the soothing slowness of conquest once he had brought his prey to ground. Marilee had never thought she might like the idea of being prey, but she had never been pinned under Alec's body before, felt the sweet weight of him, the heat of his mouth over the curve of her neck and the nip of his teeth

When he bit gently at her collarbone, it made her gasp a little, made her whine, and the sheer feel of his soft laugh against her skin made it even better.

“Pretty little Highlander,” he said, his breath hot against her

skin. “So very lovely. So very wanting...”

She wanted to ask him what he thought she wanted, because the list was rather long, but then he kept on kissing her, his mouth growing more and more intimate as he learned her body, and her protests fell away from her lips.

“Oh...” she whimpered, when he closed his lips over her nipple and sucked. “Oh, how can you do that?”

“Do you like it?”

“Ye-ess,” she said when she managed to find words again. “Yes, please don't stop...”

“If you like it, I'll do it. Simple as that,” Alec said, a teasing quality to his voice that she had never guessed at before

The idea that she could ask him to do whatever it was she wanted intrigued her, but then she realized she would actually have to stop and find those words. It was hard when his every touch seemed designed to make her groan and whimper with surprise.

Alec was as relentless in bed as she guessed he was in the field, as if he were waging a one-man war against her ability to stay quiet. The moment he found a sensitive patch of skin, he went after it until she cried out from how much she could feel. It was so much. It wasn't enough.

He was still fully clothed when he slipped a hand between her legs, cupping her there with a kind of gentleness that took her breath away. She had never thought a fighting man could be this easy with something, let alone her own body. She opened her eyes, which had been squeezed shut for who knew how long, to look at him as he started to slide his palm over her fevered intimate flesh.

“You feel good,” she said, her voice sounding exalted and strange in her own ears.

“I always want to feel good for you. Tell me if I don't.”

She nodded, meaning to tell him yes, of course, she would, but then his fingertip started to slide along her slit, revealing a wetness she had never guessed at, that startled her with how much heat it brought to her cheeks and how very good it made her feel.

“Oh... Oh, Alec...”

“That's a darling,” he murmured. “That's my lovely one. Just let me get you ready. No pain for you, I promise, not when you are so very sweet and perfect...”

When he pressed his fingertips against the apex of her slit, she nearly arched off the bed, and the only thing that kept her grounded in the least was his body pressed down on hers, his mouth kissing her belly with a tenderness that made her ache.

“You are so very lovely,” Alec murmured between kisses. “So very perfect...”

Marilee knew that wasn't really true. She was shorter and plainer and more lumpy and hasty than she should be. In another place, she might have simply laughed or pointed those things out. Instead, when she was lying underneath Alec, spread out for his pleasure and shuddering under his touch, all she could do was gasp and let his words sink into her, make her whimper with desire.

She gasped a little when he worked a single finger inside her. It was an odd sensation, just a little tugging, but no pain, no real pain at all. It was strange, but she grew accustomed to it in just a few moments as he worked it into her, his thumb coming up to swipe gently at the apex of her slit. Every time she thought that the sensation would grow to be too much like pain, every time she thought that it would be simply too much for her, that pleasure returned to blanket over it all, reminding her of Alec's promise to tend to her, to make her feel good.

“You're doing so beautifully,” Alec murmured, and she did gasp with laughter at that.

“You are speaking to me like a mare you wish to break,” she murmured.

He nuzzled her belly, just the right side of ticklish.

“The riding comes a little later,” he agreed. “Right now, I am simply... accustoming you to the idea that it is enjoyable.”

She floated for a while in the web of pleasure he wove over her. There was nothing to be afraid of here, nothing at all to threaten her here or to make her tense or afraid. The only thing that mattered was his touch and how it sent lazy shocks of pleasure through her.

Marilee could feel a low tension curling up through her body. It felt, sooner than she would have thought, as if it wasn't enough. He was doing the same thing, but it was too little for the need rising up inside her. Before she knew what she was doing, she had dug her heels into the mattress underneath her, arching up toward his body in a mute demand for more. She reached down, taking hold of his wrist, and he stilled immediately.

“Do you need me to stop?”

She knew that he would if she asked, but the teasing note to his voice told her that wasn't what he meant.

“No, no...” she murmured, and surely, her face must have been as red as an autumn sunset. “I want... more.”

“Do you?” he asked, and she caught a flash of white teeth, a grin that made her ache.

“Please!” Marilee said, her voice breaking, and she could feel

something in him break as well. It made her think of lake ice cracking under her feet, and she moaned wildly because along with the sense of danger came the idea that yes, yes, this was precisely what she wanted, what she needed.

Alec had no quick or clever response to that. Instead, he could only growl, pulling his hand away so quickly that she nearly gasped. In a few moments, he had torn off his clothes, and when he returned to her, he was as naked as she was and as unashamed as some pagan god come to claim his prize.

“Marilee, my beautiful Marilee,” he growled, pushing her legs apart so he could come to kneel between them. “I want you, so much...”

When he came down to slide his body against hers, she gasped at the size and the weight of his manhood. It seemed large, too large by far for what she knew it had to do.

“Alec...” she murmured, but then she gasped at the pleasure that came when he butted the blunt head of his manhood against the flesh he had been touching so very tenderly. It felt good, so good that her eyes fell closed, and all she could do was spread her legs wider for him as he leaned down to kiss her shoulder, her neck, and then finally her mouth again.

“It's all right, it's all right,” he murmured. “I swear to you, it will be...”

There was no reason in the world for her to trust him. Absolutely none at all. He was her enemy, and he had likely killed her kinsmen, and they had tried to kill him. In that moment, it all went away, and the only thing that mattered was coming close to him, letting him take her in every way that he could.

She gasped with a slight sting as he pushed inside her, but it wasn't even a pain. Instead, there was something perfectly right about how he fit inside her, how he had taken such care that she was soft for him and open.

His first few thrusts were shallow and careful, his face tightened with control and worry, but when she moaned, wrapping her arms around him, she felt the sliver of control that he was hanging on to shudder and shatter.

"Beautiful. beautiful girl," he breathed next to her ear, and then he started to thrust, sliding almost all the way out of her before surging all the way back in. It felt good, so good, and the brief sting of pain was immediately forgotten in the surge of pleasure that swelled over her.

It was all she could do to hang on to Alec, to let him steady her even as the pleasure within her, the tension and the wild need for him that she had never before experienced started to give, and she hung on to it frantically. This felt so very good, and she had no idea what would happen after...

She whimpered frantically as Alec nuzzled at her ear, his teeth nipping down firmly on her lobe. Instead of hurting, it only made her moan more loudly.

“Let go for me, darling. Let go. I will not let you fall. I will not hurt you...”

That was what she needed. The pressure that had been kindling inside gave way with a power that left her stunned, and she felt as if she had been flung high in the sky. The pleasure was bright and hot. It was almost too much, it was just perfect, and somehow, as Alec growled and spilled deep inside her, shaking with his own climax, she knew that nothing was ever going to be the same.

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CHAPTER 16

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Alec came back to his own body slowly, aware in a vague sort of way of the fact that he was still holding his weight up on his elbows, making sure he did not crush Marilee underneath him. By the thin flickering light from the hearth, he thought she had never looked so beautiful, her eyes closed and her lips parted, her hair a glorious rumpled halo around her head and her cheeks pink from what he had done to her.

Still clasped within her body, Alec leaned down, kissing her lips gently, careful of how tender they might be.

“All right?” he asked, his voice hoarse in his own ears.

Marilee didn't open her eyes, but a slight smile curved her lips.

“Yes,” she whispered, but then a trace of discomfort crossed her face. She reached down, petting his hip with a tentative gesture.

“Only, maybe...?”

Alec understood immediately, pulling back from her body

slowly. Even softening, he could feel how slick she was, how her soft channel gripped at him, and he willed his renewed interest in what they had done together to go away.

“Don't... don't go too far,” she whispered, her soft words striking him straight to the heart. Alec had the idea that she did not allow this sweetness out very often, that there were very few people in the world who knew it even existed.

“No, darling, I won't,” Alec murmured tenderly, and then he pulled her into his arms. It made his heart tighten in a way that he was not used to, and they fell asleep like that, wrapped up in each other's arms.

Alec knew the night they had spent together would have consequences, but that could wait for the morning.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that morning eventually did come. Alec sat up in the bed as the dawn light filled the room slowly, and for a short while, he simply watched the beautiful girl sleeping next to him.

Beautiful in any light, in any and every way. How in the world will I ever give her up now?

Alec was not a fool, and he knew himself well enough to know something bound him to Marilee, something he could no longer pretend was only the fact that he had been a while without a woman.

Something about Marilee had him by the throat and refused to let him go.

“Precious thing,” he murmured, knowing he had to rise, if only to see about some kind of food for them. He rose from the bed, shifting the blankets to wrap them around her more comfortably, and then frowned at the bedding underneath them.

A few drops of blood, ones he was sure couldn't have been there the night before. When he looked down, he could see a light staining on his own body as well, and a dark suspicion came into his mind.

His first instinct was to wake Marilee, but then sense reasserted itself. Let her sleep. Instead, he bathed in water summoned from the inn workers, dressed, and had them send up some porridge to break their fast. It was just a little after dawn when Marilee awoke with the cock's crow, and the sleepy pleased look on her face was banished when she realized she was in the bed alone.

“Good morning,” she said, sitting up with the blankets wrapped around her nudity. “You are looking very... very unhappy this morning.”

“And you're not?” Alec retorted. “I thought you weren't a virgin.”

She gave him a cool and level look, and even in the turmoil currently turning over and over in his mind and heart, he still found her beautiful, her defiance, her cool strength even when naked and

ravished.

“Strange, I didn't care that you weren't,” she retorted.

He glared at her.

“You must know, madame, that I would never have touched you
—”

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“So, it is *madame* again after all we have done.”

“What I have done to you,” he growled. “What explanation can I
make—”

She looked at him in horror.

“What explanation do you have to make?” she demanded. “What
we did, that was only between the two of us. We needn't do it again if
it is going to fash you so!”

A part of Alec railed against the idea of never doing what they
had done again, refused to consider it, but he fought it down.

“I am not my own man,” he said, ignoring her stricken look,
“and as my prisoner and the hostage of my king, you are not your own
woman either.”

She glared at him, something fevered in the gleam in her eyes, in the flush of red on her cheeks.

“So you slept with me because you thought you could do so without consequences. I think that says something terrible about you, doesn't it?”

Alec could barely hear the reproving sting in her voice. He shook his head.

“Why would you let me do such a thing? Don't you care about —”

“My what?” she cried, surging from the bed. For a moment, she almost forgot the blanket, letting it slip down, and then she remembered, hauling it up with a furious glance. “My what, Alec? Whatever it is, it's mine. I'm not an English girl to shrink from every new thing, to think that my body isn't my own.”

“It's not your own,” Alec said, his voice as hard as iron. “It may have been before you left home. It may have been after. But right now, it belongs to the King of England, his token, his to hold hostage until he agrees to release you.”

She stared at him, and the tide of horror he saw wash over her made his breath catch in his throat, made him feel as if the world had finally toppled the last defense he had against it. It felt like dying and being reborn in scourging fire.

“You belong to Edward,” Alec made himself say again, even if the words felt filthy on his tongue. “You belong to him, and it is my responsibility to guard what belongs to him.”

For a moment, he thought that Marilee would cry. Other women would have, and at least if she broke like that, he could understand it. He could offer her comfort or he could leave until she composed herself. He knew what to do with tears, but he had no idea what to do with the way she squared her shoulders and thrust her chin up, as if daring him to strike her.

“Well then,” Marilee said softly. “What in the world makes you any different from MacTyr and his slavers?”

Alec thought that he had been ready for any abuse or hurt she could throw at him. He had been sure he could withstand it, but when he heard those words come out of her mouth, he realized that he would never be ready for her, could never defend himself against her at all.

“You are likely right.” He nodded at the tray of food next to the smoldering fire. “Eat. We are leaving soon.”

Because he could no longer stand it, he stood and left. He didn't go far, however. He stood just outside the door, wondering what he had done. If he would ever be forgiven for it. He realized after some time that he didn't want to be forgiven for taking her last night. He would never be forgiven for something he did not regret, and saints in

CHAPTER 17

[illegible]

Marilee was aware of time passing, but it was a strange thing. She heard voices, she tasted terribly thin barley gruel being spooned past her lips, she felt cool cloths being placed on her brow, and a gentle hand cupping her cheek.

It made her think of the stream close to the keep. There was a bridge crossing it, but if you wanted to stay hidden, say, if you had games in the forest that you wanted to run off and play with your brother, there were the steppingstones. Some were as broad as the flagstones of the hall, others were as small as her own foot, but they were all steady, and if you hopped just right, you could cross the stream without falling down into the water at all.

Her memories of that time were like steppingstones, shockingly lucid moments where she remembered a face, the curve of a cheek, or the sensation of a wooden spoon pressed to her lips. Between them was nothing at all, a black void that ate all else, and in some strange way, she started to wonder if the blackness would rise up and devour her, eat her just like it had eaten everything else. Just like ti had

eventually eaten Davy.

In the end, however, the steppingstones held out, and somehow, she made it unscathed to the other side. Close to the end, when she was unsure of which way to go, she heard a hoarse voice singing a song in a language she didn't understand, soft, low, and melodic, and it was so soft, so pretty, that she turned her steps toward it.

That was how she found herself opening her eyes in the morning light, blinking around her and feeling as if her entire body had been wrapped in carded wool for the winter.

“What in the...?”

She struggled to sit up only to feel a dull ache throughout her frame, but then she was pushed back into the bed.

“Saints be praised,” came a deep voice from beside her, and she turned in surprise to see Alec by her side, though not Alec as she remembered him.

“Why, you've grown a beard,” she said in astonishment.

Alec only stared at her with a dumb kind of surprise, and then his shoulders sagged, and he shook his head with a dry and almost desperate laugh.

“Of course. Of course. When Marilee MacPherson wakes up from a killing fever, the first thing out of her mouth is how wretched I

look.”

“Wait, a killing fever?”

He nodded solemnly.

“Aye. The priest has been in once or twice to see if you might need to be shriven. It was close. The healer thought you might simply die of the heat or of your heart being too weak to withstand it for so long...”

She scowled.

“I wasn't going to die because I got a little sick.”

“You could have. I am glad you didn't. They said that your memory might be a little scrambled. What is the last thing you remember before you fell ill?”

She thought for a moment, and then gave him a cool look.

“I remember what we did together. I remember that you think I'm Edward's slave now.”

Alec flinched at that. It occurred to her that there was something more open to him now. She had thought the beard was the biggest change, but there was something gaunt about him as well, something hollow in his eyes that startled her.

“Alec, how long was I fevered?”

“Almost a week,” he said. “I’ve mostly been staying by your side. Harassing the doctor. Swearing at the priest, because he thought you were going to die and I could not bear it.”

“Can’t have you losing your prize for the king, can we?” she muttered.

Alec sat up straight, regarding her with a gaze more shuttered than it had been before.

“If you will, madame.”

He stood, and Marilee didn’t know why she felt a pang of guilt at that. It wasn’t as if she had said anything untrue.

“I’m going to see if I can find you some food. Stay where you are until I return.”

“Afraid that I will try to make a break for it?” she asked with a slight smile.

He gave her a weary look.

“Afraid you will try to move and land flat on your face.”

As it turned out, frustratingly enough, Alec was right. She barely had more strength than a kitten, and even standing up to walk across

the room made her catch her breath. She was just back to the bed when he returned with the thin soup, and he gave her flushed and sweating face a wry glance.

“Tried it, didn't you?”

“Of course, I did.”

To her embarrassment, he had to feed her as he would a child, holding the bowl for her and using the spoon for her. However, after she was fed, she felt a great deal better, if ready for sleep again.

“Where are your men?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Sent ahead with the head of Lachlan MacTyr. Edward wanted us back before this, and he must be happy with that prize, if I cannot come.”

“I am nothing but trouble for you,” Marilee said drowsily.

He was silent so long that she thought he would not answer her, but then, just as she slipped off into a deep and dreamless sleep, she heard him chuckle.

“You are, beautiful one,” he said quietly.

She was so far under she could only wonder if he actually kissed

her forehead or if she had only dreamed it.

* * *

When she awoke again, it was full daylight, and Marilee realized she felt so much better. She sat up in bed without a hint of dizziness or fatigue, and she watched in curiosity as Alec used his smallest sharpest dagger to scrape away the beard he'd grown after she fell sick.

“Good choice,” she said quietly. “It wasn't very attractive on you.”

She thought she had spoken quietly enough, but he jumped, cutting himself a little. He swore, and in an instant, Marilee had crossed the room, turning his face so she could see the cut. It was deep and the blade had been sharp, the blood coming up and running. Without thinking of what she was doing, Marilee leaned up, pulling him down so she could seal her lips over the cut. The pressure of her mouth cut off the flow of blood, and she counted to fifty slowly.

“Marilee,” Alec said, and she caught her breath as best she could when she realized she could feel her name as he spoke as well as hear it. Suddenly, with her mouth pressed against his throat, she realized he was stripped to the waist and she was wearing what must have been one of his shirts.

Slowly, she pulled back, licking the coppery taste of his blood on

CHAPTER 18

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They set off the next morning, and as Alec got their gear ready, he saw Marilee blink at the new dress he gave her.

“What was wrong with the one you gave me first?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“The healer recommended that it be burned. The contagion could have been passed any number of ways, and the dress was one of them.”

“Ah. And at least this one I can do up myself.”

It was likely better that way. It was one more temptation he could do without, because now that Marilee was healed and looking about her with those bright and lovely eyes, those temptations were legion.

When she had first fallen ill, he had been relieved that his desire for her had lain dormant. He was pleased in a grim sort of way that

his need for her hadn't extended to her prone and fevered body, that he was not so much of a lecher as all that. He wanted to care for her, desperately wished to heal her. He had sat up with her, stirring with every moan, every weak flailing, and if he could have made her better, there was not a great deal he would not have done.

He had grown used to caring for her, but now things were different.

He wanted her more than ever, and the only thing in his favor was that she seemed to have no idea.

Just a few hours past dawn they came out to the inn yard, greeting the chestnut gelding that was dancing a little for the chance to be away from the stables. Alec settled up with the innkeeper and grinned a little to see Marilee stroking the horse's plush nose.

"All ready," he said, and then his breath caught in his chest as Marilee nodded and tried to swing herself up into the saddle as she had done before. She was strong enough to travel, but she was not strong enough for that, and he rushed forward, swearing as she tumbled back down. She would have hit the ground hard if he hadn't caught her, pushing her upright in the saddle as she blinked.

"Oh," she said, and Alec snorted.

"Oh," he mimicked. "Yes. You are not healed yet. Please stop trying to act as if you are."

She shrugged, as careless about her own health as any young knight.

“How will I find out otherwise?”

“By being easy and taking everything slowly,” he said through gritted teeth and mounted up himself.

It was and wasn't like it had been before. They rode well together. She was a good horsewoman, and she knew how to move her body with his. This time, however, when her body pressed against his, he knew very well what it felt like pressing against him naked. He knew what it would be like to lay her down and to come over her like a stallion covering a mare and what sounds she might make if he could only stroke her, touch her, pleasure her in the way she needed.

A small voice popped up in his head, wondering if it mattered any more. When all was said and done, could they...?

Then he would remember the look of crushing fury and hurt on her face, and he knew that it was over, that he had lost whatever tenuous right he had to touch her. Whatever he had had before, it was gone now.

That night, when it came time to make camp, she silently helped him build up the fire and settle the chestnut gelding. He only realized that he was following her with his eyes when she glanced back at him, dropping the armful of kindling by the fire.

“So startled that I can be useful?”

He shrugged.

“A noble Englishwoman would not be so.”

“Because she's fragile?”

“No, because her strength lies perhaps in others knowing she has none. She will wait, and the rest will arrange the world around her, often giving more than they thought they would or could.”

The explanation had made sense to him once upon a time, but right now, it felt surprisingly flimsy in light of Marilee's amused look.

“Well, I think I would rather be the daughter of a Laird, who can at least be made useful sometimes. And either way, is it not better to have our fire sooner rather than later?”

Tension still seethed between them. When they reached for the same twig and their fingers touched, Marilee flinched back, and Alec cursed himself.

It wasn't until after they had eaten, when they were resting and watching the slow dance of stars over their heads, that Alec spoke again.

“Did I hurt you?”

She tensed. For a moment, he thought she would storm away from him, even if she couldn't go far. A darkness passed over her face, and then, to his surprise, it passed. It left her looking thoughtful, her features oddly fey in the flickering firelight.

“You mean when we made love.”

He wondered if it was a Highlander tradition to be so very blunt. An English girl might have eluded it, refused to name it, but Marilee was made out of different stuff.

“Yes,” he said.

“Perhaps a little, but what does it matter? Being a person in the world is pain, isn't it? Isn't it pain to walk and stumble over a stone or to get thrown from a horse when you take a ride for the first time?”

He frowned.

“What are you saying?”

“That what we did in bed together hurt me a great deal less than what came after.”

Her words, uttered calmly and without any kind of recrimination or accusation, felt like a punch to the face. Alec stared at her, and she only went to crouch by the fire, poking at the flames with a stick thoughtfully.

“I have had women try to hurt me with their words before,” he said after a moment. “I know that you are not trying to do that at all, and yet you do it so easily.”

“So there, you see.”

“What do I see?”

“Hurt is only a part of the world. If we live in this world, we hurt each other.”

“is that all? Is that all we are meant to be for?”

Marilee paused, gazing into the depths of the fire, something a little foreign about her in that moment, something almost fey.

She makes me think of the beautiful fairy women who would lure men into the darkness. They promised wealth, they promised their bodies, but Marilee, I think, would promise her wisdom and her words. How far might I follow her if only she asked?

“I think,” Marilee said after due consideration, “that it is inevitable. But then so is joy.”

“Have I given you any joy in payment for what I have done to you?”

He didn't mean to ask it of her. After what he had done to her, after he suspected that their fight had pushed her somehow into the

fever that had felled her, he did not deserve to ask her that question, and he did not deserve to have it answered. Alec thought she might simply snap at him, but instead, she looked up at him with a grave expression in her piercing eyes.

“The kindness and care you showed me when you touched me
—”

Alec winced.

“That is what every woman should receive from any man who cares even a small amount for her.”

“But it *is* rare,” Marilee insisted. “No matter what I did first with you, I was no innocent to these matters. Women speak in the Highlands, and I would wager that they speak in England and the south as well. Men are not known for being kind.

You were kind to me, and... what I felt at your hands...”

For the first time, she looked unsure, glancing up at him, down at her hands and back and forth again. It made her look, Alec thought, achingly young and sweet, and it was all he could do not to sweep her into his arms and hold her, just hold her, until the world was better and could be trusted with such a prize.

“Yes,” she said, and something in his chest wanted to shatter at the sweetness of her voice. “Yes, I have had a measure of joy from you

as well.”

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CHAPTER 19

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Marilee could only assume that the fever had roasted her brain at some point. Otherwise, she would never have said such things to Alec when she knew they would be lying down together afterward.

She wanted to do the proud thing, to say she would sleep across the fire from him, but they only had so much bedding, and more than once, another shiver shook her, the last remnant of the fever that had not yet gone back to normal.

Instead, after they had eaten and after the fire had been properly banked, Marilee removed her gown and climbed into the small pallet of blankets Alec had laid out for them in her shift. She waited with the wool blanket drawn up to her chin for him to strip to his trews and climb in with her. There was an awkward shuffling, and then Marilee couldn't stop herself from laughing a little.

"You're acting like a frail and fainting maiden," she said.

That drew a laugh from Alec as well.

“I don't want to offend you more than I have.”

“You'll only offend me if you think I am so fragile that I cannot cope with keeping warm in the night. Or is it your own control that you are worried about?”

She had thought she was teasing him, but Alec went quiet even as he pulled her close. It was much better to be pressed against him than held away, but she looked up at him curiously.

“Is it your own control you are worried about?”

Alec gave a harsh and self-deprecating laugh.

“Control. When it comes to you, I do not think I have very much in the way of control.”

“It is not only your control we have to worry about,” she retorted, and she felt a shiver go through him. It awakened the fire in her again, just the low sparks, but it was too easy to see where they could, either of them, blow it into a wild flame, one strong enough and hot enough to consume them both if it came down to it.

“Do not tell me such a thing,” Alec said quietly. “If you hold my honor in any esteem at all, I beg you, Marilee, do not tempt me like that.”

“That's the problem with you, Sir Knight,” Marilee said, a caustic tone in her voice. “You will not realize that it is my honor and not

yours that would be in question if I did such a thing.”

Alec didn't respond, and she thought with some reluctance that was likely a good thing. Even in lying down together like this, they were playing a dangerous game together.

Be grateful for this, she thought, as his arm came around her. His solid body was pressed against her back, and his warm breath tickled her ear. It felt good, so very good, and despite her early bravado, she was not nearly as recovered from her fever as she had thought she was.

Safe in his arms, she fell headlong into a deep and dreamless sleep. Whenever Marilee started to wake up, she was comforted by the weight of Alec's arm over her waist, the soft tickle of his breath in her ear. Those things reminded her that she was safe, and she allowed herself to fall into a deeper sleep.

* * *

Marilee was frustrated to find out that despite not reeling on her feet while she was trying to walk around their camp, she was by no means healed from her fever. She weakened far more easily than she was pleased with, and more often than not, by the time Alec called a halt, she was already half-asleep on the horse, her cheek pressed against his back and her weight pushed against him like a sack of flour.

“What if I’m like this forever?” she asked, stretching out on her back one night. “What if I’m precisely this weak for the rest of my life?”

“You could sew,” Alec offered. “You could weave. Women in England do embroidery.”

Marilee glared at him.\

“I hope,” she said icily, “that that is a joke. Even in England, women do more.”

“Yes, but not noblewomen,” he said.

She found herself turning over on her side to gaze at him curiously.

“You know that I still know how to birth a sheep in a storm on a cliff, right?”

He blinked at her, too polite to tell her what a daft thing that was to say but unwilling to let it go either.

“When did you need to learn that?” he said at last.

She smiled.

“When I was twelve. The wealth of Clan MacPherson lies in its livestock, cows and sheep both. When it’s lambing season and calving

season, no one gets to sit at home and embroider pretty little flowers.”

“Even the laird?” asked Alec, a fascinated tone in his voice. It struck her all over again how very different the Highlands and England were if he could be stunned by such a little thing.

“Aye, even the laird. I do mean everyone had to work come those busy days. The very old and the very young stayed inside heating up poultices for us to soak bandages in when they were needed, and the rest of us were out in the gale, doing what needed to be done. My father, my mother, my bro... my brother.”

The word, Davy himself, had crept up on her. She felt strange, as if her own tongue was some kind of traitor to her. It was the first time that she had mentioned him so casually since he was killed, and to do it in a conversation with an English knight...

“Your brother worked with the calves and the lambs?” Alec asked, and she shot him a quick look.

Alec was a perceptive man, she knew that. There was no way he would have missed her hesitation and her pause, and she knew he remembered what she had mentioned about Davy before. Instead of pulling away, however, he only stared at her across the fire, his face open and welcoming.

He's giving me something. Suddenly, she knew it was an invitation to talk about her brother if she wished to do so. She hesitated, eyeing it

as if it was some kind of treat she had not been given before, something too strange for her to welcome immediately.

“Davy had a way with the cows,” she said at last. “He could never get the hang of the sheep except to hold them for shearing, but he could make a cow walk backward off of a cliff if he had a mind to do so. He always said it was only a matter of knowing what they wanted and telling them to do it, but I heard some of the older men say that Davy had a gift for it, some kind of understanding that went beyond his good nature and good eye.”

Marilee laughed a little.

“What a trick, really, until he took up the sword and then realized that was what all the girls liked. He was the best man to have in the cow byre in a difficult calving, and he could calm down even the most temperamental bull. Once when I was only a wee thing, I fell into the bullpen, and he was the only one who was brave enough to pull me out.”

“That was good of him,” Alec said.

She grinned at him.

“I only fell in because he said that I was a little coward, and he got a switching for that when our father learned of it. Still, it was a daring rescue.”

She came to a stop, slightly shocked at herself. It was as if the words had been stoppered up inside of her, and now they had run their course for a moment. She took a deep breath, and then another, but for perhaps the first time since her brother had died, she didn't want to rage at the world that had taken him away.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Alec shrugged.

“I did nothing...”

“You let me think of my brother as he was and not the corpse the English made of him,” she said. “That is not nothing.”

She rose from her place by the fire, clad in her shift alone, and padded to where Alec sat. She could feel his body tense even though he did not move, but she only took his face in her hands and held it so she could kiss his brow.

“Thank you,” she said. “You have given a piece of him back to me.”

Alec said nothing, and not long after, they fell into the pallet together to sleep.

Good, Marilee thought, pressing her face against Alec's bare shoulder. *He is so very good, isn't he?*

Despite everything she had been told about the English and everything she had told herself, she knew he was, and that thought carried her off into a kind and deep sleep.

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CHAPTER 20

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Alec could feel the grief wrapped around Marilee sometimes. Day to day, as they made their way south and simply got on with the business of living, it was invisible. Other times, when she grew tired, when she was shaky with the after-effects of the fever, he saw her eyes go distant and her mouth grow soft and sad.

That was when he would come and sit with her. They did not need to speak. They did not need to broach any of the issues that rose up between them. Instead, they were quiet, and sometimes, to both his surprise and seemingly to hers, her hand would end up in his, her fingers squeezing gently even if she didn't look at him.

It did come to him how strange it was that he had come to be bringing Marilee south, not Marilee just as the hostage of for King Edward, but instead, Marilee as the sister of David MacPherson. The story had spread since the previous year, and the details of it only made Alec more confused rather than less.

The previous battle season had been a bad one for England.

There were fewer engagements, and the English had fallen back from most of them at the end, beaten back by the Highlander's superior knowledge of the terrain, by the unreliability of hired mercenaries, even by the weather that swept in and flooded out the lower plains.

There had been a truce at Biegild, a field to the far west. English forces had met Scottish, and the battle had been a heavy one. Neither side would yield, and finally, both forces withdrew at nightfall to fight another day. David MacPherson was the commander of the Highlanders, and though he was a vicious fighter and a good war leader, there had been no indication that he was a dishonorable man.

The story came back that he had risen in the night with all his troops and tried to break the English line, coming not as fighters but as assassins. His efforts had failed, and when his men were sent running, MacPherson himself had been taken captive.

Justice on the border was a swift thing. There was no time for anything else, and MacPherson was known to be a dangerous man. His living presence could rally a countryside that was still undecided, and he was executed.

Alec flinched.

Executed was a kind word for what they had done. They had hanged him until he was near to dead, and then they had quartered him. The various parts of him were sent to various corners of the English-held lands to be displayed as a sign of what happened to

dishonorable rebels. His head had been sent to Robert the Bruce.

And yet.

Something about the story didn't ring true. Alec had met MacPherson in battle once or twice, though they had never traded blows. Alec wouldn't have guessed that MacPherson had a devious bone in his body. He struck like the hammer of Heaven, hard enough to stun the world when he drove at the English line. It didn't seem to him that a man like that could turn to strike at undefended men in the night, as the story went.

Alec held his peace. It wasn't his place to feed the grief that sank sharp claws into Marilee. However, sometimes, when her eyes went distant and she seemed as if she were a million miles away, he put her arm around her, lending her his presence, giving her his silence.

"You could get a long way like that," she said one night, giving him a slight smile.

"A long way?"

"With that silence of yours. It makes me think that you understand without you needing to say a word."

"Who's to say I don't?" Alec asked with just a hint of amusement. "I'm not quite the idiot that you believe me to be."

“I never thought you were an idiot,” she said, “but I suppose you have learned that we are not so very good at talking and should, in fact, keep back from it.”

He shrugged, hiding a slight smile. He rather liked her smart mouth, her flashes of putting him in his place. It was too easy to forget that she was Laird MacPherson's daughter, a creature of wildfire and spirit. Even if some men might say that she was easier to handle silent, he would always prefer her laughing and clever and teasing.

“I like talking to you,” he said. “But I suppose I also like being quiet with you. There's something good to it that I am not sure I have ever had before.”

She raised her eyebrows, and she seemed as surprised as he about the slight smile on her lips.

She stretched out on her back by the fire. They had been lucky that day, catching a pair of trout in the stream that they steamed over the fire. Their bellies were full, and a kind of soft laziness fell over them.

“Talk to me, then,” she said softly. “Tell me about where you are from.”

“Trenton,” he said with a soft sigh, and then h

e told her about the rolling green hills in the summer and how

the branches of the great old trees would snap under the weight of the snow in the winter. He told her about the orchards where the fruit hung down lush and heavy, perfect for preservation for the winter. He told her about what it was like to be sent away from that place, sent to make his fortune in the wars, and how he had never been back, and how likely, he never would be back.

“But it's home,” she said, sounding as offended as he had ever known her to be.

He blinked at her.

“I don't think you have ever sounded so angry.”

She snorted.

“You haven't been paying attention. I am angry over many things, and I have a great deal of time. I can be angry about my situation, and I can be angry for you. That is your home, and you are simply not going to return to it?”

“It is where I am from,” he corrected her. “I was born at Trenton, and perhaps, if I am lucky, one day, when I die, I will be buried there. I hardly think that I will be worried about where I am buried, because, after all, I will be dead. It is beautiful, and I was happy to be there for a short while, but after all, you only asked me where I was from.”

“Have you no home?”

For some reason, it was uncomfortable to look at her just then.

“No more than any soldier does,” he said with a shrug, but she did not lose that strangely tragic look in her eyes.

“My brother and all of his men knew where home was,” she murmured, and then she reached for his hand again. “I hope you find yours.

“It's hardly a thing that I have been worried about,” he murmured.

Almost as if she knew how piercing her own gaze was, she closed her eyes.

“You are very good at killing who you need to kill. You are very good at staying alive and making sure that your men stay alive as well. What else are you worried about?”

Alec took a deep breath, let it out, and took another.

“I'm worried about you,” he said softly. “I am worried about what will become of you.”

“If you were really worried about me, you would let me go,” she said, but the indolence to her words told him she wasn't so very worried about that herself.

“You know that I can't do that.”

CHAPTER 21

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Marilee's first thought when Alec pulled her into his arms was relief.

It felt as if she were a fish that had somehow been living on land for months. The moment his mouth claimed hers, it was as if she had returned to the place she belonged, as if everything was right again. He held her, and she reached for him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders so tight that he would have been hard-pressed to push her away.

There was nothing elegant or graceful about his kiss. Nothing in him wanted to spare her the need and the power of it. All she could feel was the heat that had been slumbering under their skin this entire time, allowed to spill out at last, and she knew that he could no more forget what they had done together than she could.

She murmured brokenly against his lips, and when she opened her mouth, his tongue swept in, tasting her, claiming her. She was wrapped up in the smell of wood smoke that clung to both of them,

the wool of his tunic, the light oil he used to care for his weapons.

So good... He feels so very good...

It wasn't until she felt the hard press of his manhood against her hip that she realized that things had gone further than she had thought, that there would be consequences to these actions no matter how good they felt.

“Stop,” she murmured, pulling back slightly. “Stop, we can't.”

Alec pulled back, and her heart beat faster to see how dark his eyes were. She could read his desire for her in his face, and she knew somewhere in her heart that if she did not stop him, if she only told him how much she wanted him, they would both be lost.

“I'm won't hurt you this time,” he murmured, and she pulled out of his arms entirely.

“You didn't hurt me the first time we did this,” she said. “Only I can't.”

Alec swallowed, and she almost gave in to it all again when she saw how red his lips were, knowing how good they tasted and felt on hers.

“I understand,” he said hollowly.

He didn't. She knew he didn't.

She wasn't an English girl to be so fraught about her maidenhead. She had grander things on her mind than making a good marriage, and such things were simply of less import in the Highlands.

It was only that w

hen she was in Alec's arms, she forgot everything else. Every day, they grew closer to the court of the English king. She would need her wits about her if she was going to affect her revenge. When she was with Alec, nothing else mattered but being with Alec.

Over the time they had been traveling, she had come to terms, somewhat, with her brother's death. It no longer rose up to hurt her at strange times, and she was not stricken with pain so bright she thought it would send her blind.

The unreasoning pain had gone, but the fury remained, and that was the weapon she would sharpen to bring down the man who had killed her brother so disgracefully.\

All those thoughts flew out of her head when she was with Alec, and that she could not allow.

“I'm sorry,” she said quietly. “I can't. And we shouldn't.”

To her surprise, Alec smiled a little. He reached up to touch her face, running his fingertips from the soft hairs at her temple down her cheek to the very point of her chin. His touch sent prickles of heat

through her, made her catch her breath slightly, but then he pulled back.

“I understand,” he said again. “You don't... you do not owe me anything. Not in this life or the next.”

She had thought she would never sleep that night, tucked into his arms and her thoughts racing with heat. To her surprise, however, it only felt good, and safe. They had slept like this for weeks, wrapped up close to each other like lambs in a byre, and somehow, it ached to realize that sooner rather than later, she might never do this again.

They were drawing closer to Edward's court in Leincaster, and soon, everything would change.

“Alec,” she murmured.

He stirred a little, his arms tightening around her for a brief moment. She could tell from the sleepy sound he made, however, that he was not really awake.

“Would you run away with me, if I asked you?”

He grumbled, burying his face in her hair, and she stifled a small smile. It was something he did sometimes when he was on the edge of waking, hanging on to her as if she were something too dear to be without in either place.

“I don't run away,” he mumbled.

She rested her hand over his, stroking it gently.

“Of course, you don't.”

“I'd follow you,” he said after a moment. “I would follow you until the day I died.”

His words made her heart squeeze almost painfully, and she shook her head. That she could see too clearly, a death for Alec somewhere in the middle of this. When she had her revenge against Lord Branford, she was prepared to meet her own end. It didn't matter what happened after she avenged Davy. She had gone into this matter sure that her chances of surviving it were very low.

What would they make of Alec, however, who had brought her from the North?

She had thought herself past caring about herself, and she was, but what about Alec?

To her surprise, Alec's hand came up to stroke her hair, his normally deft motions made slightly clumsy, somehow only more endearing by sleep.

“Y' think too much,” he grumbled. “Sleep now, for Heaven's sake, Marilee.”

It was too much. There was no way to tell where this tangle began, no way for her to protect anyone. Her lot had been cast, and

the only way out was forward.

She slept.

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CHAPTER 22

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They rode into Leincaster, and Alec couldn't stop a soft laugh at the way that Marilee was looking around. He could feel her twisting her head back and forth to see the sights, and when they passed by an enormous display of baked bread shaped to look like little turtles, she gasped outright.

“Do the people here live this way all the time?” she asked. “It looks like a festival day.”

“It is not London,” Alec said, “but yes. Leincaster is one of the biggest cities in the region, and people do very well here.”

“And there are so many of them,” Marilee said with a faint sniff. “I'm not sure the tradeoff is so very worthy.”

“Nothing is going to please you short of Mount Uaine, is it?” Alec asked, and he could almost feel her startled look as they twisted their way through the street vendors.

“You know where I am from?”

“I actually do listen when you speak. I know where you are from. I know what's home.”

It turned out that they had arrived just at the right time. Edward's court, that is to say, his courtiers, his lords, his entertainers, the small city that roved with the king to make his presence known and felt, was not yet in residence. The stewards and servants had arrived to make sure the castle was habitable, but the nobles themselves and Edward were still a day or so distant.

Alec found them a room at a prosperous-looking inn, a decent place with clean sheets and hot food, and then he had given in to Marilee's large eyes.

“Do you want to go see the city?”

“I don't want to beg any favors of you,” she said, haughty in that way she could be sometimes that he had learned to find only endearing.

“I'm not doing you any favors; you'd be doing me one,” he said with some amusement.

She gave him a suspicious look.

“What are you talking about?”

He pointed at her dress.

“What's the matter with it?” she asked. “It needs to be hung up and brushed out, but...”

“You are meant to be the daughter of Laird MacPherson,” Alec said. “If I bring you in like that, they'll laugh us both out for frauds.”

Marilee lifted her chin, her gray-green eyes snapping with a sharp humor.

“You know that this is actually finer than what I wore at home, yes?”

“Yes, while you were pulling stuck lambs out of sheep, you told me. But...”

He paused, and Marilee dropped her pose to come closer to him. This close, he could see the freckles scattered over her nose. He had counted them a few times on their trip, knew that there were seven of them.

“What are you thinking, Sir Knight?” she asked. “Come on, out with it. I'm not such a wilting flower to pull away from the truth.”

“You're not always wrong about English ladies or English lords, either,” he admitted. “I... I do not want to see you embarrassed.”

She lifted her chin with that spirit that made his heart ache for her sometimes.

“I cannot be shamed by people like that,” she said. “People like that have nothing to frighten me...”

“Marilee...”

He was braced for a fight, but then she melted into a smile, like the sun coming out after a long winter drizzle.

“Fine. For your fastidious comfort, Sir Knight. On one condition.”

“And what condition would that be?”

“That you get some new clothes yourself.”

Now it was Alec's turn to frown.

“Why should I? I'm a soldier-”

“And will you not be with me? Will you not be presenting me?”

Neither of them said what came after that, that sooner rather than later, he would be leaving her in Leincaster, returning to his place on the lines or sent off on some other mission for Edward. It was not happening today, so neither of them said it.

“All right. If that's your pleasure.”

He had meant the words lightly, but when he said it, a red blush came upon her cheeks, and she looked away.

“Yes,” she said, and then with her arm in his, she tugged him back out onto the streets.

* * *

Alec had been to Leincaster a time or two, but now he realized that he had only visited the city in winter, Seeing it early summer was something entirely different. The city had come alive, banners fluttering high from every post, full of life and the urgency of people who know that they only have a few short months before the snow returns and they must go back indoors.

Of course, there were tailors, and Alec, still spending the money that had been given to him to run the operation to capture MacTyr, spent a great deal of it to make sure they both had clothes for the next day. The tailors squawked in offense that he would make such a demand, and then squawked in surprise when they saw how much he would pay them.

At the tailor's, he had been amused to see another side of Marilee, petting the fine fabrics, marveling at the dyes and the skill of the stitching.

“I wove at home, of course,” she said as they walked out. “I mean, we all do, but I was better than good at it. The fabrics that they have here, however... perhaps England is not so wretched as I thought.”

Alec winced as some men turned their heads to glare, and he hurried her on.

“We're not on the border any longer,” he said. “You ought to watch your tongue.”

She gave him a slightly amused look.

“I will for you, but I promise you, my accent will draw all the trouble you like, no matter what I am saying with it.”

Alec was rather afraid she was right. More than once, he had seen people cast looks at her when she spoke, even if it was the most innocuous thing. Marilee, of course, would never consent to being still or hiding herself, but it reminded him exactly what he had brought her to.

She was a hostage in enemy territory, and he was her captor.

Before they could go back to the inn, however, there was one more stop to attend to. Marilee paused when they came to a blacksmith's shop.

“I had thought you meant to present me to Edward with the cuffs still on.”

Alec blanched.

“No. I am not so very cruel, I promise you.”

The blacksmith looked a little askance at the iron rings around her wrist, but for Alec's price, he shrugged.

“Hand on the anvil,” he said. “Mind you don't move or I might take your hand right off.”

He laughed at his joke until he caught Alec's glare, and then he hustled to find his tools. Alec turned to Marilee, startled to see her biting her lip.

“I've seen something similar,” she said by way of explanation. “A croft boy was helping the blacksmith with something, holding something on the anvil, and the hammer went awry. He recovered, but he lost two fingers...”

Alec swore softly.

“That man, he'll be lucky if I pay him with a rap to the head. Believe me, if he injures you in the least, he will suffer for it.”

He knew that he couldn't have been all that much help, but Marilee offered him a wan smile. He held her free hand, and he never took his eyes off of the blacksmith, who wielded his hammer and chisel with a great deal of care and concern.

In the end, it might have taken longer than it would have without Alec's glare, but Marilee stood up from the anvil with her hands free, shaking them out in surprise. Alec winced a little when he

CHAPTER 23

[illegible]

Marilee was startled to feel so very light after the manacles had been struck from her wrists. When they had first been put on her by MacTyr's men, she had worried at them for hours and then for days. They weighed her down, they troubled her thoughts. They chafed and prevented her from sleeping.

Then, at some point, she started ignoring them. It wasn't a conscious thing. Instead, it was simply something she had to do to survive. She had to keep the other girls moving. She had to remember to eat, and if water was available, she had to drink as much as she could because who knew when it would next be available?

She had forgotten her chains, and at some point, they had become almost a part of her, something she could not really see any longer because it would be too distracting to do so.

And now... they were gone.

She kept touching her wrists with a kind of nearly suspicious

wonder. Surely, it wasn't that simple. Surely, it would take more to win her free, to release her from those old bonds. And yet, Alec had done it with no more than a moment's thought, and she kept sneaking looks at him as they walked.

The man was something of a conundrum, she decided. He was a powerful man in the world, as the Highlanders reckoned things. He might not have land or money, but he was a fighter who led others and who had the ear of his king. Beyond that, how else could power be reckoned?

Alec gave her a curious look.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Only thank you for getting the manacles off. I had... almost forgotten them, truth be told.”

“We couldn't simply bring you before the king in chains, even broken ones.”

She gave him a rather crooked smile that he did not return.

“It would have been appropriate, don't you think?” she said, wryly, but from the way he frowned at her, obviously, he did not agree.

“You are a hostage. You will be treated fairly.”

“I will be treated how the king says I am treated,” she said with a dark look. “It will hopefully be no worse, and it will certainly be no better.”

They were walking past a dark alley just at that moment, and just as she saw Alec get ready to argue, hands closed over her shoulders and mouth, and she was hauled backward off her feet.

Her first instinct was to start fighting, but before she could get her feet underneath her to do so, someone gave her a breathtaking slap across the face and hauled her deeper.

Alec was just a few steps behind her, blue eyes blazing with the very fury of heaven, and he reached for his sword with a snarl.

“Now, now, sir,” said one of the men who held her. “She's just a fragile thing, you know. Far better that you give us the money in your purse than risk her pretty hide just for defending your pride. I'm sure she would rather have her lovely face than you have your purse.”

As if to drive the point home, a knife appeared from nowhere, the sharp point tracing down her cheek. The moment she felt that cold sharp point, she realized something: *if he gives them what they want, neither of us are getting out of this alley alive.*

She wasn't sure how she knew that, but she knew it like she breathed, and as Alec snarled and reached for his purse, she realized she had to take matters in her own hands.

Instead of scratching at the hands that held her or crying out to try to reason with them, Marilee simply went limp. She did it not caring about the sharp knife still just inches away from her face, and she did not trouble herself to make it look pretty or theatrical.

Instead, she went down like a bag full of stones, the way she had seen people faint before. One moment, she was standing, and the next, she was sagging toward the ground as if there was no other place for her to be.

The men holding her, three of them she could see now, were so intent on Alec's purse that they had no way to predict what she was about. One man leapt back and another stared down at her. The other one, the speaker, turned around entirely.

In a moment, they would slap her or drop her, but right now, instinct prevailed, and they hung on to each other, staring at her face, taking in the languid sprawl of her limbs. That was as far as they got, because the next moment, Alec was on top of them, swinging the flat of his sword around with all of his great strength and the pommel as well.

The robbers went from being certain that they had found a pair of plump and vulnerable travelers to pluck to realizing that they should not have touched either her or Alec. As soon as they let her go, Marilee was throwing fists and feet, landing hits that jarred her all the way up to her shoulders. A moment later, they had taken off for points

unknown, and Alec was on top of her, pulling her into his arms with a look of fear on his face.

“Are you all right?” he demanded. “Did they hurt you? I swear, if they hurt you, I will have the guard skin them alive.”

Despite that rather gruesome image and the fact that she rather thought that Alec would go through with it, Marilee couldn't help but grin.

“I'm fine, I'm fine...”

She started to say something else flippant, but then she saw a darkening patch of blood on Alec's tunic.

“Oh, but you're hurt, let me see.”

“It's nothing,” Alec said firmly. “Let's return to the inn. I'd rather avoid another confrontation of that sort.”

Marilee started to protest, but then she realized she would better get her way if she let him have his first. Despite the wound he had taken, he put his arm around her, and the rest of the way back to their inn, he looked around fiercely as if daring the world to try something against them again.

“Are you all right?” he asked more than once. “Those monsters didn't touch you more than that grab, did they?”

“Of course not,” she said softly. “Of course not, I promise you...”

She was fine. There might have been a few bruises, a few scrapes, but at the end of the day, she was fine. She felt a kind of fond exasperation for Alec and how very quickly he had leaped to her defense, but she wished he had spared himself at least a little bit in doing so.

He never will, she found herself thinking as they gained their inn. It is not in him to do so. He will not spare himself. He will fight, and he will protect, and he will battle until his very last day.

It was a brutal time. Even without the war with the English, many people would not live to their full span. She did not know why the death of a man who was in almost every way her enemy should bother her so.

“Marilee... did they hurt you after all?”

Alec turned her toward the last of the light so that he could look at her, and it was only then when she realized she had started crying.

“No,” she said. “I’m fine, I promise. I suppose all of that was perhaps just a little overwhelming.”

He gave her a suspicious look, but it was the truth. She had no wound on her body at all, and he could see it. She had no idea how to explain it anyway. It was only when she thought of Alec falling in

CHAPTER 24

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To Marilee's relief, she quickly realized that Alec's wound was minor. A small knife had glanced off Alec's side, leaving nothing more than a bloody graze. It had torn his tunic, making her pleased that she had insisted he order a new one, and the walk back had broken the wound open.

“If you leave this alone, if you get rest, it should heal nicely,” she said, pleased.

Alec gave her a wry look.

“It's the battle season. I am not sure how much rest I am really due to get for another four or five months.”

Marilee gave him a stern look.

“If you want to continue your career as a soldier rather than embarking on a new one as an invalid, I am sure you can find the time to rest. The war gets by when you are not there. I assume it will continue to get by quite handily if you are recovering.”

He fell silent after that, only wincing a little when she poured handfuls of cold water over the wound. She grit her teeth at the sight of his blood, but when it was bathed, she could see even more clearly how very minor it was and how easily he would heal.

“There,” she said. “Not even a stitch needed.”

“Can you sew men together then? In England, it is only the province of doctors.”

“And midwives,” she said with a slight smile. “All midwives know how to stitch a woman back together after a child has split her apart.”

Alec winced at that, and she laughed out loud.

“Men love to boast about how powerful and stalwart they are in the face of blood and battle, but let a woman speak about what she has learned from the childbed, and he goes pale.”

“What a woman does in childbed is far harder than facing down a sword,” Alec said.

She looked at him curiously.

“I’ve not heard many men say so.”

“Most men are idiots,” he retorted, lying down gingerly on their bed. “I have seen enough women give birth to know it is as terrifying

as facing down three swords at once.”

Marilee made a considering sound, sitting on the edge of the bed next to him.

“But afterward, you get a bonny babe, if you are fortunate and if Heaven is kind. The prize at the end of a battle is your own life and not much else besides that.”

“War is a terrible game,” he agreed, and for a while, they fell silent. The fire crackled, and a kind of peace fell over them, something sweet and oddly fragile.

“Have you caught?” Alec finally asked, his voice gruff.

For a moment, Marilee was confused.

“Oh... you mean... when we lay together. Have I—”

“Yes.”

She shook her head.

“No signs, and... and I have not bled for some months. Give a woman enough pain and too little food, as I was given with MacTyr, and the body refuses to do as it might otherwise do.”

Alec flinched but nodded.

“Good.”

“Good,” she echoed. “What a shame to have to take the risk of such a thing when you might just want the pleasure.”

Alec cut a quick glance at her before looking away.

“What? What is it?”

“You... don't always have to take that risk,” he murmured.

She frowned at him.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean... there are some things we can do that would have no risk at all, or next to no risk.”

Marilee felt a deep warmth travel from her neck up to her hairline. She could see it, or perhaps, she could start to see it. All she knew was that she wanted more, and that she wanted Alec to show her. She hesitated, and then she threw caution to the winds. The next day, she was going to the court of Edward, looking for her revenge. She had nothing to lose.

Alec's hungry gaze stayed on her as she stretched out next to him. In the dimness of the room, it was hard to make out his expressions to see what he was thinking.

“Show me,” she murmured.

He looked reluctant.

“I would not offer you more hurt or more offense.”

“Then only do as I say,” she murmured. “*Only* do as I say...”

He reached over to cup her face with a large strong hand. Her heart started to beat harder and faster. They were both fully clothed, and nothing had changed. Nothing at all. However, as she stared into his eyes, and as he pulled her to him, she felt almost faint with promise, need, and a sense that this was always going to happen between them from the moment they laid eyes on each other.

“Tell me,” he murmured.

She took a deep breath.

“Please me. Don't do anything that could harm me. If you can, please yourself.”

In the semi-darkness, his white teeth flashed in a terribly sharp grin.

“That is a great deal of territory, my pretty Highland girl,” he murmured. “Are you sure?”

“If you are. If you know that you will not do more—”

Her words cut off as his mouth claimed hers. She had known that when they first kissed there was a hurry to it, an urgency and a need that would not be denied. This time, however, Alec took his time, kissing her mouth as if it were a delicious meal that he wanted to savor. He brushed his lips across hers lightly at first, soft as a blade of grass brushed over her skin. He did it over and over again, and she was just beginning to wonder why when the sparks of pleasure started to build up from it. Once they started, they would not stop. She could not put any distance between herself and that sensation. Instead, all she could do was hang on him, opening her mouth in a desperate bid to take more.

She cried out when his tongue slid between her lips, thrusting in and out lazily in a rhythm she recognized. He tasted her, and she realized he was letting her taste him as well. It felt so good she thought wildly that perhaps that act alone would have satisfied her, but then his fingers were fumbling for her laces.

She sat up to give him more access, and a moment later, he was pulling her heavy kirtle over her shoulders and throwing it on the floor. Her chemise met a similar fate a moment after, and then to her surprise, he was going after her hair, not stopping until it rippled down around her body like the waves of a river.

Marilee thought for sure that he would strip then, but instead, he stayed fully clothed, bringing her to straddle his thighs. She whimpered when she realized how very open she was to him, and

against her thigh, very briefly, she could feel the hardness of his manhood.

“You want me,” she murmured, and he gave her a sharp smile.

“Could you ever doubt it? I want you with every breath I take.” He uttered it as if it were a straightforward fact. The sky was blue, the grass was green, he wanted her, and it made her heart squeeze tight for a moment.

Then his hands were sweeping up and down her body, grazing the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs and the sides of her breasts, and all of it fell out of her mind. The pleasure that swept in after his touch left her gasping, and she dug her fingernails into his chest, raking red marks into his skin.

“I want you,” she moaned softly, and he laughed.

“Good. Trust me. I will never harm you, my pretty girl, my darling love...”

He reached up to lightly roll her nipples between his fingertips, just enough to make her squeak. Her cheeks went red with the embarrassment and the pleasure of it, and she pressed down against him restlessly.

She realized now what a trap it was she had set for herself. She wanted everything they had done together and more, but she had sent

him a boundary she knew he would never cross. She knew it as well as she knew the color of her own eyes. Marilee squirmed, desperate, but Alec stayed where he was, his hands trailing up and down her skin, setting her on fire while never reaching what it was she wanted.

“Alec, oh, Alec,” she gasped, and he growled at her, a sound that sunk into her body and left her whining with need.

“You asked me for this,” he said roughly. “You cannot fault me for giving it to you.”

Before she could respond to that, one hand pushed her upright, and the other reached between her legs. Her flesh there felt hotter than it should have, but a few strokes from the pad of his thumb left her wet as well. It seemed as if her body was tuned to his in a way she couldn't explain. It wanted him, and the moment he touched her, everything in her wanted to give up. All that mattered was how his thumb stroked over her clit, moving back and forth between that sweet spot and her opening. She could feel how slippery she had grown, how very good it was. Her body was moving of her own volition now, rocking against him, urging him deeper. The sounds she made were choked and soft, full of need, and finally, Alec uttered a deep growl and tumbled her to the bed.

The look in his eyes was so dire that for a moment, she thought his control had snapped. He would take her, it wouldn't matter what they had decided, and Heaven above, she could not blame him. It felt

wrong to make each other feel this way and then not fulfill the promise of it, wrong not to let him claim her. Marilee stretched out on the mattress, spreading her legs and reaching for him, but instead of mounting her as she wanted with every fiber of her being, Alec came to rest by her side instead.

“Beautiful girl,” he growled in her ear. “You could tempt the devil himself.”

He thrust two fingers inside her, making her cry out with the suddenness and the fullness of it, and at the same time, his free hand caressed her clit with an almost savage pressure. It was almost too much. It could have been too much, but instead, it was exactly what she needed. She arched up to him, her hips thrusting desperately and searching for the sensation she was certain only he could give her.

She felt as if she must be suspended forever in this place of heat and desire. It felt good, so good that she never wanted it to end. She tensed her muscles, ready to push it away, to fight it off, but Alec refused to give her a choice about it. His hands, his touch, even his words were relentless. He urged her on, told her how very beautiful she was like this, told her how very much he wanted her no matter what. His words as much as his touch pushed her closer to the edge, pushed her harder and harder, and then there was no choice at all.

A moment later, Marilee's entire body tensed, and she gasped as the claws of pleasure raked at her. It felt so good, and then somehow,

it felt better, the heat scorching her so hard she knew she would never be the same again.

Marilee thrashed hard, unable to stop herself from kissing him, letting him possess her as much as she could, as much as both of them would allow. It felt too good to have his arms wrapped around her, and she wailed with the pleasure, crying out and unable to stop herself.

The tremors had just barely stilled when Alec reached down to handle his own manhood, and she couldn't keep from staring as he took himself in hand and found his own relief. She was entranced by the hard lines of his body, his intense need for her and the pleasure of it. They were so close. It would only have taken a little more time, a little more force, before they were entirely joined one to another... and yet she knew they couldn't.

Alec rose first, reaching for the basin of water and a cloth to clean himself. When he returned to the bed, she felt as if there was something of the storm to him, restless and wild, still for now but unpredictable.

“Here,” he said, his voice soft. “Let me.”

She could have told him that there was no need, that she could tend to herself more easily than he could, but she sensed that somehow this was important to him. They both knew that he hadn't hurt her, quite the opposite, but this was a part of it for him. Some

deep need inside him wanted to put her to right, to make her feel good and to make sure that all was well.

Wordlessly, her eyes half-closed, she spread her legs so he could touch her, reassure himself that she was unhurt.

Saints in almighty Heaven, but what would he be like if I could keep him? If I had a future.

In a moment, she realized the danger of being with Alec. In every word and deed, with every touch and caress and soft, sweet moment, he told her there was a future waiting for her. He said that he might be there with her, and the pleasure they shared, rather than being a soft and aching thing, was merely something that could be a part of their lives forever.

Instead, she knew the truth of it. She was in the south for vengeance against an English lord. She would not relent, not for adversity, but not for pleasure either. She had given up everything that would hold her back, and at the end of it, she would have to give up Alec as well.

When they both lay down on the mattress, when his arms came around her, Marilee couldn't help the fat tears that flowed down her face, soaking her pillow.

I can't give this up. But she knew that in the end, she would have no choice.

CHAPTER 25

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Alec would not have taken back the night he had spent with Marilee for all the world, perhaps not even for his own soul, but he wondered if it had been a mistake. He had felt nothing but peace when she lay in his arms afterward, but there was something distant about her the next morning.

He woke up in a slight panic upon realizing that his bed was empty, and then he realized that she was bathing out of the basin close to the hearth.

“If you are delivering me like a haunch of meat or a baker's dozen of bread loaves to your king today, ought I not at least be clean?” she asked, and shamefully, terribly, it was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that they didn't have to go through with this. They could flee. They could disappear.

However, his duty was clear, and as if to punctuate that duty, a messenger arrived from the tailor with their clothes. Alec was pleased enough with his, which were in truth only slightly nicer replacements

for the clothes he had worn into the ground over the last few weeks.

The dress that had been produced for Marilee, however, made them both pause. She pulled it out of the cloth packet, letting the soft wool skirts fall in thick folds to the floor as she held it up.

The gorgeous thing had been dyed a forest green that brought out the red in her hair and the soft green in her eyes. A simple pattern of paler green leaves were stitched into the high collar and the sleeves, and two dark stripes of fabric along the hem of the skirt gave it a hint of something noble.

“Whatever you spent on this, it's too much,” Marilee said softly.

Alec laughed a little.

“Should I have it sent back?”

“I would beat you into the ground before I let you take it,” she said firmly. “It's so gorgeous. I would never get a gown like this besides in this situation, I think. I could sell it and gain myself a heifer, so I could.”

She slipped a clean shift over her head and then the gown as well. Like the first gown he had given her, it laced up the back, and there was a limit to what she could do up on her own. She turned to him silently, and Alec felt a kind of ache as he laced her up. His fingers were quick and nimble, but it would never be appropriate for a

man to help a lady like this, even if she was a hostage.

He drew her dress tight, tying the laces in a bow at her nape. He knew he was taking longer with it than he should, but he could feel their time together dwindling down to nothing. In light of that, every touch was precious. He would remember every time his fingers brushed her nape, every time he pushed her hair over her shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said at last. “Are you ready?”

“Are you?”

She frowned at that, and for the first time, he thought he saw the hesitation in her eyes, a vulnerability he had not seen before. For just a moment, there was a chance he might have asked her to come away with him, but then it was swept from her eyes with a rush of pride and resolve.

“Of course, I am,” she told him. “I am the daughter of Laird MacPherson, and I will not shy away from whatever it is you English can throw at me.”

Alec found a slight smile playing on his lips. Of course, he could expect nothing but courage and defiance from her.

“All right,” he said, and then as she turned toward him, he couldn't resist pulling her toward him for one kiss, one last kiss.

He meant it to be soft and chaste, but as soon as she got over her

surprise, Marilee clung to him, her tongue sliding slyly into his mouth, her hands buried in his hair to hold him still.

He realized with a kind of shock that she had learned to kiss from him, that her hunger was as formidable as his and that her need was the same as his. He was drawn to her in this moment, and with a kind of insight that was almost blinding, he knew that he would never stop. He needed her. He would always need her, and no matter where he was and what he was doing, that would never change.

This is the punishment for touching something that was never mine. A fire had been set inside him and it would never, ever cease.

He might have clung to her for who knew how long, but then she pushed him away. It ached, and he wanted to rail against it, but he knew that it needed to be done.

“All right,” she said. “We need to go now.”

As they turned to go, however, he caught her touching her reddened lips out of the corner of his eye. For a moment, a look of consummate gentleness and need shadowed her face, but then it was gone. She squared her shoulders and went to meet her fate like a knight.

I love her. Lord in Heaven, but I have never loved someone like this before, and I may find myself dead of it if I cannot keep her...

CHAPTER 26

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Marilee refused to look either to the right or the left as she and Alec rode into Leincaster Castle. It was a broad and elegant fortification, new as such things went, and the prosperous town had grown up around it. The gates were thrown open, and the people on the inside and the outside stared at them.

They were met in the courtyard by a stern-looking man with armed soldiers at his back, and Alec reined in the chestnut before him, though he did not dismount.

“Sir Alec Trenton, you are late,” the older man said.

To Marilee's surprise, Alec laughed.

“Better late to the castle than late and rotting in the ground,” he said easily. “Would you rather see me dead, Sir Merrick?”

Sir Merrick's face unbent enough to grin, and he nodded.

“It is yourself, Alec. Come down. King and court are settling in,

but you will be welcomed.”

Alec dismounted, and this time, when he offered his hand to help her dismount, Marilee took it. She knew what her part was now, that of a delicate hostage, and she kept her eyes down.

“Sir Merrick, this is the reason that I was so late. This is Marilee MacPherson, sister of David MacPherson and the daughter of the old laird.”

Marilee was proud when the MacPherson name caused a ripple through the crowd and a low murmur. It took a certain amount of willpower not to look around and meet their gazes with a challenge of her own. Her family's reputation was well known through the borderlands; some of these soldiers had likely met her clan in battle and lived to regret it. That made them lucky compared to the ones who had regretted it and died.

Sir Merrick's eyebrows went up, and he nodded slowly.

“Your men said something of the sort. All right. Come this way, and we will see about finding the king for his word on this matter.”

To Marilee's surprise, Sir Merrick turned to her, offering her a deep bow that looked entirely sincere.

“Madame,” he said, his voice low but kind. “You have nothing to fear from any man or woman here. Come with us in good spirit and

without concern for your safety.”

“Thank you,” Marilee said with some surprise. She had expected that she would not be hurt. It was the code for dealing with hostages. However, she had not expected kindness from the English. She sneaked a look at Alec, who was nodding thoughtfully.

“The sooner we could speak to the king, the better. I would like this matter settled before... Well. Before I returned to my proper place.”

She had expected it, that Alec would return to his proper business of war, but the reality of it struck her square in the chest. Some of her courage disappeared, only pride keeping her upright.

Get a hold of yourself. Stop. You knew that he would be leaving, and you knew that when it came to the last that you would be alone. You knew. There is no reason to lose your nerve now.

She refused to look at Alec as they followed Sir Merrick into the luxurious castle, flanked on either side by his armed men. Once or twice, she could feel Alec cast his eyes toward her. Once, she was convinced that he wanted to reach for her hand. In both cases, she steadily ignored him, walking forward as if she had never met him before in her life.

That was appropriate, wasn't it? That was the way it should have been from the beginning.

I have forgotten what I was coming south for. I will not forget again.

As they made their way through the halls, Marilee felt eyes on her from every quarter. There were the normal servants and guards, of course, but here and there she also saw English nobles, the members of Edward's court. Men and women dressed in clothing more expensive than she could dream, and though she knew that she had nothing to be ashamed of, a part of her couldn't stop herself from wanting to hide herself away. She had lived on MacPherson lands her whole life, and where she didn't know someone, she knew someone who did know them. This scrutiny from strangers had a stinging quality to it, like a blow from a small nasty switch, and she didn't like it.

They came at last to a private wing of the castle, and then to a large wooden door with two guards set in front of it.

After a murmured word with one of the guards, the order was given to enter, and she and Alec went in on their own.

The room was beautifully appointed with tapestries on every wall. Seated at the large table at the center of the room was a dark-haired man with a jawline beard. He studied the papers in front of him, and when he looked up, Marilee was confronted with eyes possessed of a dark and burning quality.

Edward, she thought almost in shock. *Called Longshanks, the aggressor in all this warfare and bloodshed.*

Beside her, Alec bowed, but when he glanced at her, she only lifted her head proudly.

Edward's smile twisted a little at her defiance, and he leaned back in his chair.

“Who are you, then, that you will not bow in front of the King of England?”

Marilee thrust her chin up at him, and when she spoke, her voice did not waver.

“I am not of England, my lord. And you are not my king.”

“I am not your king yet, woman,” he said. “Tell me, Alec, who you have brought to defy me at my own summer court.”

Alec winced a little but stood. Marilee felt a surge of dislike for how humble he looked. In a way, she knew it was only appropriate. Edward was his king, but things could be very different in the Highlands. Robert was the king, but it meant something else. Robert the Bruce was a war-leader, the symbol of a movement.

Perhaps it is only that I have no liking for seeing Alec debase himself.

“My lord, on my raid north to take the outlaw MacTyr's head, I found that he and his men were taking women captive in order to sell them to slavers in the north and in the east. When we arrived, the women had already effected their own escape. We allowed most of

them to go their own way, but in the course of it, I discovered Marilee MacPherson, the daughter of Laird MacPherson.”

The entire time that Alec spoke, the king hadn't taken his eyes off of her. It was in many ways, an unnerving look. He was assessing her not as a man usually looked at a woman, but instead, as a man might evaluate a sword or a spear. He was, she felt with a brief shudder, trying to figure how to best use her as a weapon against her kin.

What a good thing it is that I do not intend to be here in his grace long.

“Well, Lady MacPherson,” the king said after a moment. “I welcome you to Leincaster Castle, and I swear to you that so long as you behave yourself, you will have an easy time of it. In due time, with any good luck, you will be taken back home in exchange for ransom of one sort or another.”

It occurred to her that she should at least appear grateful for such a thing, and she remembered to curtsy properly, lowering her eyes.

“I thank you for your kindness. I pray that I will be allowed to return home sooner rather than later.”

The king smiled at her obedience, but Marilee's mind was already running ahead to a time when she would have her vengeance

and when the court would be squarely behind her.

[illegible]

CHAPTER 27

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Alec knew that he should be listening to his king while he spoke to Marilee, but something about the situation sat strangely on his shoulders. He liked looking at Marilee, he thought she was beautiful, and the fact that they would soon be parting ways meant he wanted to look at her more, but it wasn't just that.

Instead, he realized that as she listened to Edward speak that something was ringing warning bells in his head. He was watching her not as a man who would soon be saying goodbye to his lover but as a threat to his king. He found himself stirring uneasily until Edward nodded.

“I will send for someone to conduct you to Charles, my seneschal. He will find you quarters and send women to prepare you for the celebration tonight.”

“Actually, my lord, I should speak to Charles as well, to make sure of the provision for my mount and some other matters. I can take her to him.”

Edward, who was no fool, after all, gave Alec an appraising look, and then shrugged.

“Very well. Of course, you will join us for the ball tonight, Lord Trenton. Soon enough we will be on the march; there is no reason to hurry back to it.”

“Of course, my lord,” Alec said with a brief bow.

He felt a strange sense of relief as he led Marilee out of the chamber, pleased when she gave the king a low curtsy, but less pleased by the slight glint in her eyes.

He gave her his arm to squire her away, and they were silent as they made their way down the busy hall. Instead of bringing her to the busy seneschal, however, Alec tugged her into a small alcove in a quiet wing, one sheltered from the rest of the hall by a thick tapestry. Behind the tapestry was a quiet space muffled from the rest of the castle, and once the cloth was dropped behind them, they were alone.

Marilee turned to Alec with a question in her eyes, but then she gasped as he pushed her against the back wall. For a moment, he only looked down at her; she was so small, shorter than he was and slight. It was hard to remember it when she was standing up to the king of the land, when she was killing her own tormentor. She had somehow fooled the whole world into thinking she was far bigger and more powerful than she was. It was only now, with his body pushed against hers, that he could see how very small and vulnerable she was.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

Alec growled in response.

“I could ask you the same question!”

“What are you talking about? You are the one who took me captive. You are the one who dragged me south.”

“And you have come along very easily, haven't you?”

Against his will, pieces of the puzzle were slotting into place. He couldn't see what the final picture was yet, but he had the idea that it created something he would not like very much, something he hadn't even suspected until this moment.

“Marilee...”

“You are the one who made me a prisoner,” she said with a proud lift of her chin. “Did you want me to be worse at it? Haven't I done everything that you wanted me to do?”

“You have, and now I want to know what in the world you are doing,” he snapped. “Perhaps you didn't notice, but that is the king of England that you just spoke to. He is not some petty lordling who you can scorn...”

“I am a Highlander, and he is not my king.”

Alec shook his head.

“You amused him. You are very lucky you did, and that you are a hostage that he wants more than he wants you whipped through the town, because he could do that, and Marilee, I would be helpless to stop him. You know that, don't you? No matter what happened to you, I could not stop it.”

Marilee glared at him.

“You will not convince me to act otherwise for pain.”

“Maybe not your own, but what about mine? Marilee... I do not want you hurt. I do not want...”

Any of this, came a soft voice in his mind, but he shook it off.

To his surprise, Marilee reached up to cup his cheek. Her hand was soft and surprisingly gentle.

“Alec,” she murmured. “Darling... we are done with one another, aren't we? You have done what you needed to do. It's over now.”

Her words were as hard as flint, and they struck at Alec's heart. He had borne vicious wounds in battle before, ones that had made the medics gape at the fact that he had walked off the field and was still walking at all. These felt worse. These felt mortal.

His first instinct was to push away from her and do what his king

had commanded. This wasn't his place, and she did not in any way belong to him. He wanted to snarl at her, to hurt her as much as she had hurt him.

Then, somehow, in the rage and in the grief of it, he tugged her hand down and leaned in close to Marilee's face. He kissed one cheek and then the other, and when he licked his lips, he could taste salt.

"You don't mean that," he said, aching when she leaned forward to press her forehead against his chest, her small hands reaching up to clutch at his tunic.

"Of course, I do," she said, her voice soft and hollow. "Of course, I must. Because what else could we be to one another?"

Before he could answer, her hand came up to cover his mouth. Alec bit back the urge to kiss her palm, but she was speaking again.

"There's no place for us any longer," Marilee said quietly. "There isn't. The time we had on the road... it was something outside of our real lives, wasn't it? I will treasure it for the rest of my life, but I will not be able to return to it. Trying would... Well, that would kill us, wouldn't it?"

It would have been one thing if she had lied to him. A lie could hurt him, but it wouldn't have been this terrible and blinding thing. It would not have left him feeling flayed and as if nothing in all the world would ever mend him.

“You’re right, aren’t you?” he asked with just a ghost of humor in his voice.

“I usually am,” she said, and when he touched her mouth, he could feel the curve of it, her brave smile.

“We’re done now, Alec,” she continued. “We have to be. You will return to the war, and I... will do what I have to do here.”

“You will be safe,” Alec said, realizing even as he did so that he was hanging on to threads. “Of course, you will be. Edward is an honorable man, and so are the people of his court. You will not be hurt or humiliated.”

“As you say,” Marilee said.

To his surprise, she wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his chest and dragging him close. It felt good, more than good, it felt *right*, and Alec closed his eyes against the realization that it truly was over. A voice deep in his heart screamed against it, told him to take her and flee. They could go across the sea to France, to the north, to the west, anywhere so long as it took them away from the world they lived in.

Instead, he bent his head to kiss Marilee. They could both feel the heat, but the solemnity as well. It was a farewell. It was a statement of grief and longing, and Marilee pushed him away first.

CHAPTER 28

[illegible]

Marilee was startled to realize the denizens of Leincaster Castle and the members of Edward's court were surprisingly kind. The seneschal, Charles, was a man she could tell was used to counting every sheep and making sure the entire castle was fed, and the young maids who followed the court were pleased, she thought with some dark amusement, to have a new doll to dress up.

Rose and Mary cooed over the gown Alec had bought her, but when she suggested that she could wear it to the ball that evening, twin expressions of dismay came over their faces.

“Oh, no, madame,” said Rose. “You need something more elegant by far for tonight! Tonight is the first gathering of the king’s most favored for the battle season. You must look your best.”

“Even if I’m a glorified hostage?” she asked with some humor, but she could already tell that the silly little maids had no concept of that.

She wondered what it might be like to live like that, so very isolated from the world that her only concern would fabric and manners and looks. She thought she would like it very well, but then the real world would intrude. It always did.

As the maids went over the clothes available and the fabrics they could use for a surcoat and trim, a bath arrived, and Marilee decided that she would allow this for the moment in light of the bath.

I am going to grow quite spoiled by all these luxurious heated baths. Then she realized that if her plans went off, she wouldn't be spoiled for very long.

I'll simply be dead.

Instead of panicking her, however, it sent a cool peace through her. She sunk into the bath, closing her eyes as the hot sudsy water enveloped her bare body.

I'm back on the track I'm meant to be. She refused to think of Alec and what other paths she might have taken.

Marilee floated in the haze of pleasure for some time, so it was a rather horrid surprise to open her eyes and find little Mary standing by the bath with what looked like an incredibly sharp knife in her hand.

"What in the world!" Marilee cried, rising half out of the water.

She was ready to fight, but Mary only cringed back, panic in her pale eyes. She was the least likely of assassins, and Marilee paused in confusion.

“What...?”

“It is fashion at court,” Mary squeaked. “They imported it from the French and the French from the south. I thought it would please you to be shaved.”

Marilee stared.

“Like... a lamb?”

She had been exaggerating, but the girl nodded eagerly.

“Oh, but it is the newest thing, madame! Here, only let me show you while the water is hot. It will please you tremendously!”

Bemused and honestly a little curious, Marilee sat back down in the bath and watched cautiously as Mary took one arm and Rose with her own knife took the other. The two girls were as chatty as magpies and as gentle as lambs themselves, and it was easy to let them do as they pleased, even when their work going shockingly intimate.

“Oh... oh, my goodness, are you playing some kind of trick on me?” Marilee asked in shock. “You can't be serious!”

“That's how all the ladies of the court reacted as well,” Mary said

cheerfully. “Believe us, you will enjoy this. It is very much a part of the style. Look, see my arm? I've done it, too...

When Marilee ran a dubious finger down both maids' arms, she could see that they were shaven as well, a shocking thing that made her shiver a little. What kind of place was the court where such things were simply a matter of course?”

“All right. But if I find out that this is some kind of trick, I will take such revenge on both of you...”

The girls giggled, but now she could see that there was no harm to them, none at all. She found herself fascinated, annoyed, and jealous of them all at once. How was it possible to live such carefree lives, where all they needed to worry about were the styles and fashions of the court?

*You had better learn to think as they do for at least a little while.
You will need to function in the court for some little while to come.*

By the end of her bath, Marilee was red up to her hairline. They had shaved off all the hair below her eyebrows, exactly thorough and merciless, and she didn't know how to feel about all of it. She did draw the line at letting them towel her dry, and instead, they presented her with a dozen choices for clothing, taken from the chests that had been brought all the way from London. It was a kind of wealth that she had never considered before, and for a short while, she wanted to shun it, to lock it away.

CHAPTER 29

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Alec had intended to take his leave after he'd delivered Marilee. After all, once he had done his job, there was no longer any reason to stay. He was a soldier, and even if he was nominally Lord Trenton, he was designed for the battlefield, not the dance floor.

However,

Charles had made it very clear that the king expected him, and it wasn't like there wouldn't be other military men in attendance. This court was meant to gather the men who would be leading the war effort in the battle season to come. Some of them would be receiving their marching orders here, and then they would be operating independently for the rest of the year. Some of those men would be the ones Alec would see on the field. It made sense that he would stay and at least take their measure.

But there was Marilee.

When he had delivered her to Charles, and Charles had handed

her off to a gaggle of brightly-dressed young maids, it felt as if a great hand had reached into his chest and tore out everything he needed in there. It had gutted him in ways he hadn't expected, and his first instinct had been to tear them away from her and steal Marilee away.

Alec had known immediately how very foolish that would be. He was one of Edward's knights, but there was a limit to the kind of wildness they would tolerate from him.

No, it would have been better by far to make his excuses, to head north to the war camp in Warbeck. It was where he belonged. He would be able to drown out the echoes of the past few weeks with Marilee in battle.

But he couldn't resist the chance to see Marilee again. Just for a moment. Even if he couldn't come close to her, even if it meant that he would have his heart torn out again and again.

She has driven me mad. If I were a superstitious kind of man, I would think she was a witch who had eaten my heart in the middle of the night.

Marilee was no witch, however. If it was magic, it was only the most natural kind in all the world, powerful as the dawn and lasting as the stones of England themselves.

So he put on the new clothes that Marilee had insisted he buy,

and as the hall filled with courtiers, he hung back in the shadows and watched. The sun had gone down, the torches had been lit, and the finest members of Edward's court had come dressed in their best for the event.

He recognized some of the men, grizzled warriors who looked as irritated as he did to be at an event like this one. He even recognized some of their wives. Most of the noblewomen stayed at home to tend and in some memorable cases, to defend their estates, but some came to the war season with their husbands. He saw Lord Hargreave with his stern-faced wife, and Lord Canaby with his wife, who looked young enough to be his daughter. Lord Canaby received plenty of disgusted looks for the youth of his lady, but he looked unconcerned, squiring her about on his arm as if it were entirely appropriate.

And I suppose this is why I would rather be on the field. At least if we are all trying to keep from being killed by a Highland war party, we are not realizing that we are mostly terrible people.

A passing page handed him a flagon of something red, French, and expensive, and that helped. At the very least, it helped him cushion himself from the impact of having Lord Canaby actually come up and try to speak to him.

When he disentangled himself from that mess, the musicians had set up, and the dancing had started. From where Alec stood, he could see Edward on the high seat, overseeing all of this with an inscrutable

look on his face.

He may very well prefer to be at war as well, Alec thought with some amusement.

He kept an eye on the dark corners where he guessed that Marilee would have hidden. He couldn't imagine her in this crowd, couldn't imagine her surrounded by these rich idiots who never had a thought in their heads beyond the newest fashions. If he found her, they could at least...

The whispering started well before he saw her. The crowd rustled around him like tall grass that hid a wolf or some other large predator, and he turned. Usually, that sort of thing revealed some kind of disaster or another. He doubted there would be any kind of disaster at a ball, but then he moved enough to see the dance floor and realized he was wrong.

The musicians had struck up a processional, a dance where couples in a line moved up and down the hall. The effect was surprisingly beautiful, with the men and women moving together, and then the men moving as the women copied them. There was something militaristic in the movement, and oddly lovely as well. Alec knew the dances, had been tutored in them as a young boy, but he had never been very interested in them at all.

However, he had also never seen Marilee at the head of the progression, her hand held firmly by a man old enough to be her father.

He stared as the two of them led the dance, and he couldn't take his eyes off of her face, her body.

She wasn't dressed in the gown he had bought her, a small and petty part of his mind noted. Instead, she wore a dress made from what looked like sheared precious velvet, dark green and gleaming in the torchlight. It was heavy enough to drag on the floor, and as she moved, he could see that it had been laced tight to her figure. He realized that the whole room could see the swell of her hips below and her breasts above, and the old man who held her hand could certainly see them.

It's Lord Kennen, Alec noted with distaste.

The man was a known lecher, and he made no secret of his interest in his young dance partner.

And as for Marilee... Alec couldn't read her at all. The slight smile on her face looked false to him, like some kind of decoration she had pinned on to complement her gown. She went through the motions of the dance with a grace he had known from seeing her ride, from seeing her walk and move. She was beautiful like this, but it was false.

Alec was struck by a sudden blazing need to walk across the floor and drag her off of it like some kind of jealous husband. He knew it was madness, but that was before the next figure started.

The old man was replaced by a young lord Alec didn't know, a dashing figure with the longer tunic that was becoming so very popular in the south. The old man gave way to the younger one with ill-grace, and this man leaned in to say something to Marilee, making Alec grit his teeth.

The next dance was livelier, a case dance. The couples moved across the floor, first the men and then the women, and Alec simmered when the sting in the music called for a trade of gestures.

The women made a gesture, a tilt of their head or a clasp of their hands, perhaps, and the men mimicked them. The tradition of the court had changed, however, and the women offered up their cheeks for a kiss. It was a scandalous tradition from the French, and apparently, Marilee knew the dance or had been told about it, because she dutifully offered up her face for a kiss, sending Alec's blood boiling.

The young lord, however, apparently felt as if he deserved more than a kiss. The next moment, he had pulled Marilee into his arms, and Alec's control broke. He growled, making the heads of the elderly matrons next to him turn with surprise, and then he was striding across the dance floor.

CHAPTER 30

[illegible]

Marilee entered the dance floor the way she imagined her brother entered the battlefield. He had always told her that entering a battlefield with his heart and his emotions first would have gotten him killed. Instead, he had to arrive with a cool head and an eye toward all the players, so she did.

She did not know what Lord Branford looked like, and though other occasions might involve formal introductions, this was something else. Instead, she was surrounded by the English, people who thought she and her people were animals or possibly less useful than animals. She could buck and sulk and shout, but that would not have given her what she wanted, what she needed, which was information.

So she became charming.

Of course, she could be charming. Her mother was a peacemaker, a Bann from Cairngorn who had married into the warlike MacPherson clan, and she had given all her skills at diplomacy to her

daughter along with her skills for weaving and house management.

“People will talk if you only tell them you want to hear them, lass,” her mother had said. “So let them talk.”

Marilee smiled, tilted her head, and listened with wide ears and wide eyes, and when the men she danced with told her how delightfully civilized she was for her background, she only giggled and shook her head rather than breaking theirs. She told herself that with every bit of information she learned, she was growing closer to Lord Branford and her revenge.

Things were going well until Lord Paley drew her into his arms for a kiss that she most explicitly did not want. He was a callow thing, of absolutely no account at all, but it wasn't like she hadn't had worse from the boys on the mountain. On the mountain, she could push them away and shout at them, but she doubted he would do any worse, besides perhaps cause her some gossip. Instead, he was pulled away from her, and then she was pulled behind Alec's familiar back as Alec glowered at the man.

“Learn to control yourself,” Alec snapped, and Marilee saw all of the peace of the evening go up in flames.

He is going to start a fight, and I cannot have that.

To her relief, the music started up again, and stepping forward, she twined her arm around Alec's with a smile.

“Oh, how silly, you have come to partner me in the dance too quickly,” she cooed, and at least it gave Lord Paley an excuse to withdraw with ill-grace. She turned to Alec when she saw that the young lord had walked away, and her smile stayed on her face, though it had gone more than slightly brittle.

“All right,” she said quietly. “You had better dance with me if you do not want me to be very angry.”

To her surprise, Alec didn't take her hand, instead glaring at her while it felt as if all the eyes of the court were on them.

“I think you're having a fine time dancing with the English lords you have conquered,” he said, and she nearly grabbed him by the tunic to shake him. In the back of her mind, she could not help but think how very handsome he was in his fine clothing. In the front of her mind, she wanted to swear at him for whatever this display was.

“Yes, but you have put yourself forward,” she said. “And my position is not so strong that I want to be the center of a scandal, Alec. Please.”

She doubted it was reason that had done the job. It was the fact she had said please.

I wonder what else he might do if I said please to him. Then she shook the thought out of her head. This was a battlefield, and she could not spare that kind of idle fancy.

Reluctantly, Alec took her hands as other couples assembled around them in a line. This dance, at least, would not have any terrible surprises. The kiss had startled her, and she had come remarkably close to smashing the young lord in the face, but this one was a dance they did in the Highlands as well.

“Do you know this one?” she asked softly, and Alec nodded as the music began.

The figure was slow and stately, and Alec danced it well, his back straight, his steps measured. The dance was long and performed with the men and the women close. It was, she had always thought, intended to give them time to talk, but Alec wouldn't even look at her.

“Are you so very angry with me?” she asked, as they passed each other side by side.

She could tell that Alec had not expected to be addressed at all. His shoulders twitched, and he glanced at her almost reluctantly. She did not miss the way his eyes skimmed up and down her body or his soft intake of breath.

“I am not angry with you at all,” he said, and then, softly, “You're so very beautiful.”

“These clothes are beautiful,” Marilee corrected him. “The clothes have dazzled you.”

Alec snorted.

“I am not some magpie to be stunned by a shiny piece of tin. I have always thought you were beautiful.”

“So?”

“So now others can see it. And I am apparently enough of a fool that bothers me.”

“I had not thought that anything about me could bother you,” she murmured, and she gasped a little as he squeezed her hand a little harder on their second pass.

“Bother me? You *bother* me every day, Marilee. You bother me every moment that I am awake, and you bother me every night when I lie down and sleep. You trouble me like nothing else in the world ever has.”

Marilee was shocked by the desperation in Alec's voice. The worst part was that in a strange way, she recognized it. It was how he sounded when he was touching her, when he tended to her pleasure before tending to his own. He needed her just as a part deep inside her needed him, and the world would never allow it.

“Marilee,” he said.

She shook her head.

“Don't say it, she said quietly. “Do not. Please do not. We are not free to... to do anything. We are not free to be who we want to be.”

“You hang in front of me like a flame I want to touch,” he said, his voice little more than a whisper. “Sometimes, I think I wouldn't care if you burned me alive.”

“I do not want to burn you alive,” Marilee said, and then she took a deep breath and told the greatest lie she could come up with. “I do not want you, Alec. Please. Leave me.”

Alec turned to her just as the dance ended, and for a moment, she saw the great grief and longing on his face.

Heaven above, I could believe you would forgive me for killing my brother's murderer, but I know that you will never forgive me for this...

Then the music ended, the people were wandering about, and Alec finally let go of her hand. His face had become a mask, and Marilee thought that this must be what he looked like before he charged into battle. When he knew that the die had been cast on whether he would live or die that day.

“Thank you for the part you have played in my life, Marilee,” he said, and with nothing more than that, he turned and walked away from her.

A part of her cried out at that. It wasn't right. He couldn't leave

her. She couldn't allow him to leave, and for a moment, she nearly gave in to the urge to call him back and throw herself into his arms.

Instead, another lord arrived at her elbow, asking her for a dance, and from some deep place inside her, she found a smile and turned to face him.

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CHAPTER 31

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Alec had to think that there was something wrong with him. A sane man, upon receiving the rejection he had, would have ridden from the castle immediately. He would have stopped to pack, to make sure he knew the way to Warbeck, where the camps had been set up, and he would have gone. There would have been nothing else to be concerned with, nothing but ruin behind him, and the prospect of a war to lose himself in in front of him.

Instead, he lingered.

He kept to the shadows in the hall, and soon enough, everyone was drunk enough on the strong wine that no one noticed or cared. Edward disappeared with some of the more powerful lords, likely to a war council about the coming year. Some men walked off with other men's wives. Some ladies walked off with other women's husbands. Once or twice, he fended off a lady who liked his looks.

None of it mattered. He drank the wine that was offered to him, letting it take the hard edge off of his hurt, and he kept his eyes open

for Marilee. She was more obscure now, dancing with this man or that, but at the same time, something tugged at the back of his head. She was moving with purpose. She was not entertaining herself. She was working, and he didn't know what that meant.

For the first time in what felt like a very long time, Alec thought about what Marilee was, what she *really* was. She was his lover. She had been his hostage, and now she was something for Edward to trade back and forth like a token, something he hoped to use to bow the Northern clans into submission.

She was all of that, and at the same time... somehow, along the way, he had forgotten that she was also the daughter of one of the great lords of the North. She was also the sister of David MacPherson, who had fought back superior English forces at West Caudill and Ipsmouth.

She is my enemy, he made himself think, and even if a great part of him refused to admit it, that cried out against the falseness of it, Alec knew it to be true. He, and every Englishman at Leincaster knew who she was, and none of them were *seeing* her.

Alec fended off the queries of two more ladies and a matron who wanted his attention for her niece. Instead, all of his attention was on the bewitching Scottish hostage who was claiming the eye of every man in the room. Alec had to sternly quell the anger that rose up at the men who were daring to look at a woman he had claimed, that a

part of his head refused to admit was no longer his.

No. No, this is what she wants you to think. Is that what she has wanted you to think from the beginning?

Some strange alchemy between his head and his heart brewed the heartbreak and the growing suspicion in him into rage. It was a little like the rage that took him during battle, like the rage that suffused him when he knew there was far too much wrong in the world for him to fix.

However, there was something entirely new about this fury because it was directed at one woman. The questions pounded at him, not letting up. In the end, he knew he had to get answers or he might commit some kind of treason, turn monster and forsake his place among men forever.

Alec forced an icy calm over his heart, one of the first tricks he had learned on the battle road. A man who rushed headlong into battle every time, who never cared who was on the other end of his sword or how far away his compatriots were was a dead man. Instead, Alec waited until his heart was beating more slowly and the crowd had turned to see something one of Edward's lords was doing.

He stalked through the crowd, and he was lucky to find Marilee at the edge of it. He was grimly satisfied to see her not watching the lord attentively like the rest of the people were. Instead, while she stood demurely enough with her hands folded in front of her, he could

see her darting quick glances around, right and left, looking for something. What she was looking for, he had no idea, but he knew he needed to find out.

It was the work of a few moments to cut her from the crowd, pulling her away and down one of the dark corridors. She stiffened before she knew who it was, but when he clapped his hand over her mouth, she stilled.

Alec wasn't certain what he would do if she fought him, if she had started to rightfully protest over being kidnapped, but instead, she was quiet. He dragged her into an empty solar lit by a single flickering torch and shielded from sight by a heavy tapestry over the doorway. He spun her around, a question on his lips, and then suddenly, she was in his arms, dragging him down for a hard kiss.

Even as a part of his mind told him that this was wrong, that this was a temptation he could not give in to, he sunk into her body as if it was a paradise he thought he would never be allowed again. Her mouth was sweet with the red wine that had been flowing all night, and in her sleek and carefully arranged hair, he could smell some kind of flowery scent. She was and wasn't herself, and it only made him kiss her harder.

Some timeless moment later, he finally encircled her wrists in his hands, pulling her back. In the light of the single torch, her eyes were nearly black, and her parted lips, so hungry for their kiss, could have

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[illegible]

Marilee hadn't known what to think when Alec dragged her out of the ballroom. At first, before she had realized it was him, she had a brief and terrible moment to wonder if it was some kind of assassination attempt. She had just gotten her hand into the slit she'd cut into the dress, just gotten her hand around the handle of the knife she had stolen from the girls who dressed her when she realized who it was.

And then? Marilee was faintly ashamed because she had thought he wanted to leave.

There was a moment, a terrible moment, one that shamed her just for having been imagined, where she would have gone with him. When she was in his arms, she wanted nothing more than to be taken away from the pretty poisonous English court, from the endless, endless war between north and south. In that moment, she could see how easy it truly was. They could both walk away, and neither of them would have to return.

Then she'd turned around, looked into his burning eyes, saw the suspicion and the fury there, and she knew there could be no peace for either of them. They were too much the children of their worlds. He was an English knight, and she was of the North, which would never bow.

“You're seeing me clearly now, aren't you?” she asked, and the pain that crossed his face echoed the pain in her own heart.

“I thought I had before, but I was wrong, wasn't I?” he asked.

“You saw pieces of me,” she said at last. “Perhaps it is only now that you are seeing the truth of it all.”

“I was never anything less than honest with you,” Alec accused. “You lied to me time after time, from the very beginning.”

“What would you do to survive? What lies might you tell if you were in enemy territory.”

“I have been more in Scotland than I have in England over these last few years,” he growled, and that lit a spark of temper in her.

“You have,” she snapped. “You were in the North at the behest of your conqueror king, laying claim to lands that were never yours and killing my kinfolk!”

Alec drew back at that, a look of dumb astonishment cross his face. She wondered if there was a chance she had somehow gotten

through to him, but then his face hardened.

“This is about your brother, isn't it?”

Marilee hoped that the light in the solar was faint enough that she would not give herself away. She could feel the blood drain from her face. She tried to cover for it by lifting her chin up and refusing to break her gaze away from his.

“You may not speak about my family,” she said, her voice low and deadly. “You do not have that right.”

“I might not,” Alec shot back. “But that doesn't mean that others won't. They are going to talk about your family, your father and your brother, and they are going to speak about your brother... and the lord who ordered his death, aren't they?”

“And do you know how he died?”

Marilee's voice was as hard as stone. She thought that if Alec touched her just then that she might strike at him like lightning from an empty sky.

Alec's face was dark, and he did not flinch away from it. Perversely, it made her like him better. If he *had* backed away from what had been done to Davy, if he had stammered or stuttered, then she would have thought the worst of him, both for what he did and who he did it for.

“I do know how he died,” Alec growled. “He attacked during a truce at Biegild. He was hanged and quartered.”

“My brother would never have broken a truce,” Marilee hissed. “I know that as well as I know my name and as well as I know yours. He was *butchered*, Sir Knight, far from home, and they sent us his head in a wax-sealed bucket to bury.”

“It is the way of war...”

“It is not,” Marilee said, tears stinging at her eyes, tears that she could not allow to fall.

“Do you think that I would be here if Davy had fallen in battle, or if someone had gotten the drop on him in a raid? I know what war is, Alec. I have lived with it longer than you have, with it in my own lands, taking the boys from my clan since I was toddling. If Davy had fallen in war, I would have mourned, yes. I would have wept, I would have raged, and I would have killed any Englishman who came north to my home...”

“But instead, here you are,” Alec growled. “You are in the South, and MacTyr could only have taken you on the borderlands. What was the daughter of Laird MacPherson doing on the borderlands?”

Marilee lifted her chin.

“Being a little fool, of course,” she said coolly. “I imagine that is

what you'll tell people when they speak of my presence here. You rescued a poor little fool from her own recklessness. You practically shepherded her south, keeping her safe as you went, and then you turned her over to wiser heads. That's what you know. That's all you need to know."

Alec drove all ten fingers through his hair, looking as if he might like to strangle her.

If ...if he puts his hands on me, he won't be strangling me.

It was an incredibly startling thing that even in the midst of all of this that she realized she still wanted him. Something inside her, something at the very core of her, yearned for him. But that was over now; it had to be.

"I am returning to the ball," she said quietly, never taking her eyes from his. "Are you going to stop me?"

"Can I?"

She shook her head.

"You could cut my head off. That might serve."

Alec flinched, and carefully, tenderly, he took her hand.

"Marilee... what if I asked. What if I asked you to lay whatever plan you had, whatever foolishness—"

“It is *not* foolishness.”

“What could I give you to make you walk away from all of this?”

There was something in his voice she couldn't let herself look at too closely. She had the feeling that if she did, she might bend or break, and she could not afford that, not when she was so close to her goal. Not when she was where she needed to be.

Still, despite her resolve, something sweet and small spoke up.

I would walk away if you would walk away...

“No,” she said. “There is nothing that you can give me beyond what you have already.”

“I could tell the king...”

“Tell him what? That I am the daughter of a man who wants him dead? That my brother has died at the hands of his lords? I wager there are many Scottish girls who could say the same. I am exactly what I appear to be, Alec. It is not my problem that no one thinks that makes me dangerous.”

“I know how I first saw you,” Alec said, his eyes as hot as coals. “I remember what you did to that man.”

Marilee felt as if she had been slapped. She took a step back, and she immediately felt ashamed for pulling back from Alec in any way,

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[illegible]

Alec couldn't sleep that night.

He ended up in the armory, examining the weapons held in reserve to defend Leincaster Castle. They were good weapons, kept in good repair, and he ended up staring at a short sword, one with a hilt that he at first thought was far too short. He examined it curiously and scratched into the ancient scabbard, he found the name *Catherine*. It was, he realized, not too short for him, but perfectly sized for whatever woman had borne it in the past.

The Highlanders were thought to be a savage people, and one of the things the English abhorred was the fact that they sent women into battle from time to time. It was not often, and it was not a habit, but there were women in the Highland lines. Traces like this reminded him that the English, in their not so distant past, had allowed women to fight as well.

Alec knew that Marilee did not want to swing a sword. No, she was after something far deadlier, and when she killed, it would be

with greater consequences than a woman on the field.

Marilee... give it up. Go home.

But of course, she couldn't. She had come exactly where she wanted to be, and he had brought her there.

He knew, prowling the armory and then the battlements, that she was right. He could tell Edward about her, and it would not be anything the king thought he didn't already know. She was Scottish. She was his enemy. She mourned her brother. There were thousands like her throughout the land, and none of them had Marilee's strength or her viciousness.

At some point, Alec fell asleep on the battlements, stretched out on the hard stone. He knew at some point that he needed to return to his bed, but he couldn't. All he could do was keep his lonely watch high on the wall as if there was some way he could prevent what was coming.

He woke up the next morning with a smattering of rain coming down on his face, clinging to his hair and clothes like dew. His entire body complained from resting on the hard stone, but as he hauled himself upright in the dim light before dawn, he scowled at the messenger riding down the road.

He'll lame his horse if he keeps that up. Then he realized the messenger wasn't thinking of his horse at all.

The young boy couldn't have been much older than fourteen, and as he came into sight, Alec could see that he was bandaged and bloody, rolling in his saddle like a drunk.

Alec roared for the gate to be opened, and he vaulted down the steep steps to the ground. As the young messenger and his mount breached the gates, Alec grabbed onto the horse's reins, pulling the frothing lathered animal to a stop.

"All right, all right," he said. "You are safe. You are safe. Come down..."

"The king," the boy gasped. "I have to see the king. Mornay has fallen."

Alec felt a chill go through him even as he helped the boy down from the horse's back and handed the reins off to a confused hostler.

"Slowly, slowly," he said, bringing the boy inside. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said the boy, trembling like a leaf. "The Bruce's banner flies at Mornay now, and Lord Fallkirk and Lord Pell have been taken hostage."

Alec swore softly, his mind racing. Mornay lay well within the border, farther south than the Scottish troops had struck in a few years. It was an English fortification, one well-defended, and Fallkirk

and Pell were seasoned soldiers, not young bucks too eager to go into battle. No, this would have been a real defeat, and now everything would change.

He took the boy to Edward, who was having his breakfast, and the king's face grew pale as the boy spoke. Other people might have been startled or thought the king afraid, but Alec knew that it was only rage.

“Well, so they have decided to strike first this year,” Edward said softly. “If they think it will give them an advantage, then we will see them sorely dismayed.”

The boy was sent to the infirmary to recover as best he could, and Alec was unsurprised to find himself ordered to Talisker instead of Warbeck. Talisker was the English fortification closest to Mornay, and that meant it was the logical place from which Edward would strike.

“You'll have men to command there, and I have a need for cunning soldiers by my side,” Edward said, and though the praise might have pleased him before, Alec knew what it meant now.

Cunning commanders meant less death for the English and more for the Highlanders, and for some reason, that thought did not please him.

The next two days were taken up with the frantic business of

getting an army on the move. There were already troops en route for the north and the battle season, and now messages had to be drafted to send them to Talisker. Alec was given some of Lord Canty's troops, as the old lord himself had come down with a cough that might prove fatal, and for two days, he had to learn how best to command them, how to translate the little discipline they had received before into something that might help them survive in the days to come.

By the time the war column set out from Leincaster, Alec had slept perhaps five hours in the past forty-eight, and he was glad that the chestnut had such a smooth gait because it meant that he could sleep a little on the ride out.

He told himself he had been so busy there was no way he could think of Marilee, but then he heard that she was coming along, part of the nobles' camp. It made sense when he thought about it. There were rumors that several of the great Northern lords had been at the attack on Mornay, and if one of them was the MacPherson, it might be some kind of leverage.

“As savage as the Northerners are, will the sight of his own daughter even stop him?” asked one soldier as Alec passed by.

“Not likely,” snorted his mate. “In the North, they’re brutes. Perhaps she would stop him if she was thrown to him naked—”

Before he could stop himself, Alec spun like a top, laying two hard blows and putting both men on the ground.

“Mind your tongues when you are speaking of your betters,” he snapped, and then he turned away because, after all, he had said worse.

He ignored Marilee until it was time to ride out, and he stared when he saw her mounted on her own horse rather than in the caravan wagons like the other women.

The courtyard teemed with activity. It was shortly before dawn, and they were leaving shortly. There was no help to be found, and Alec stared at Marilee in dismay.

“Who in the world gave you your own horse?” he demanded. “Are they just hoping that you escape into the morning fog?”

She shrugged lightly. He tried not to notice that she wore the dress he had bought for her again, the one that was more humble than she could fasten on her own. He realized that her request to wear it had likely been seen as adorably quaint when in fact it let her ride better, sit more comfortably, and do more as she pleased.

If this is all the better we are at guessing our enemies, perhaps we deserve what we get...

Something in him flinched at the idea that she was his enemy, and he shook his head.

“Why didn't they put you in the caravan?”

“Why, I told them I was unused to the luxury of the court, and far too humble for such a thing,” she said with amusement. “Don't worry. I am not going to run away. Not after you have taken such pains to bring me here.”

Alec's heart squeezed at her soft voice. It was his fault she was here, and whatever happened next, he would be the one to blame. He wondered why he was more worried about taking the blame for harm coming to her rather than harm coming to Edward or his nobles.

“And they believed you.” Alec shook his head in disgust. “Come here.”

She blinked, not moving, and impatiently, Alec came close, yanking the reins from her hands. She had been regarding him with a hint of amusement, perhaps even a kind of live-and-let-live sort of gentleness, but the moment he took the reins from her, her gray-green eyes lit up like swamp fire.

“You have no right,” she hissed.

He gave her a dark look.

“Oh, I think that if anyone has a *right*, it is me,” he said quietly. “Remember, it won't look very good if you break your gentle, sweet, and demure act right now, will it?”

She smiled, and it was all teeth.

CHAPTER 34

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When she heard of the movement to Talisker, and when she heard the speculation that her father's forces waited there, Marilee was stunned. Was there a chance she would simply be returned home, and all of this would be for nothing? It was stunning, and she wasn't sure whether it made her want to laugh or cry.

Then she heard the roster of the lords who were expected to attend Edward at Talisker. It seemed as if the English king wanted to make it very clear that the taking of Morrnay was an aberration, a sign of Scottish rebellion that would not be tolerated, and if he wanted to enforce that, he needed his more powerful lords among them. She listened hard when the rosters were discussed, and when she heard Lord Branford's name, a bright light awoke inside her. Davy would have his peace, and she would have her revenge.

Alec... was a surprise.

I should have known that he would be the flaw in the plan, the thing that I could never predict. He has been since the beginning.

Now she trailed along behind him as he surveyed the troops assigned to him, unable to even direct her own mount as he kept her reins looped through a loop on his saddle. Instead of being able to charm the people who were so apt to be charmed by her quaint Northern ways, she was instead forced to trail along behind him.

More than once, she caught people giving them curious and even confused looks, and she did her best to look puzzled and put off by Alec's actions.

At the noon stop, she gave him an ironic look.

“You know that you look ridiculous, yes? You are guarding me as if I were some dangerous criminal.”

“Aren't you?” he asked, not in the least put off. “You forget, Marilee, that I know you.”

“You don't,” she snapped, suddenly piqued by the slight smile on his face. “You do not.”

“You think I don't?”

A sudden glint in his eyes made her feel startlingly and suddenly naked. It was a strange feeling to experience at the best of times, but right now, when she was on a horse in front of some of the most powerful English nobles in the land, it was much stranger.

“I know you don't,” she retorted.

He shrugged.

“I believe I know you better than anyone here.”

“That is not difficult.”

“And I think I know you better than your own family does.”

“I am not so sure that I want you putting your mouth on my family,” she said, her voice low and slightly threatening. Alec nodded, but she could see in a heartbeat that he was not cowed.

“I think that your family doesn't know you're here,” he said, his voice light. They rode on, and he unhooked her reins from his saddle, bringing her bay mare to trot alongside his gelding. This allowed them to speak quietly to one another, soft enough that no one would hear them over the tumult of the wagons and the animals.

“What does that matter?”

“I think that no family would be so eager for a second funeral that they would send a young girl to avenge her warrior brother. They would not have sent you.”

Marilee bit her lip, because that was true enough to sting.

“It does not matter.”

“Of course, it does. At the very least, it lets me see you, how you

must have looked in those long dark days after David MacPherson's death."

"Don't," she growled.

That made him nod, flinching a little.

"It is not my intent to mock your brother's passing. What happened to him..."

He trailed off, and Marilee stared at him.

"Go on," she said, and he shook his head.

The most clever thing to do, most likely, was to take the tentative truce. Both of them could hit to hurt in this moment. He knew her, but she also knew him. She could almost feel the seams in his armor, and it did not matter if she had never really been taught to fight. She could attack and defend in other ways that she guessed might leave Alec reeling.

I don't want to hurt him. A small part of her ached with it.

It didn't seem to matter what she wanted, however, because she lunged ahead anyway.

"You don't think he deserved his death either, do you?" she asked, her voice soft. "How did it feel then, to see such a savage death and to know that it was unearned?"

“I do not know.”

“You do,” she said, never taking her eyes off of him. He sat in profile next to her, staring at the road in front of them, but she guessed that he saw none of it, given the tension in his shoulders and jaw. If he were a wolf, the fur on his shoulders would be bristling, and he might not be showing off his teeth yet, but it would be a near thing. Instead, something reckless urged her on, pushed her forward, and she leaned in closer. It was his fault, after all, for refusing to let her ride free.

“You do,” Marilee repeated. “Did you meet David in battle?”

“A... a time or two. I met many men in battle, Marilee, and believe me when I say that if I had had the ability to do so, I would have killed him.”

“Oh, yes, and he would have killed you as well, I know. You are both soldiers, and killing is your business, after all. But he was never a butcher, and neither are you.”

“You sound very certain of that.”

“I know that about you just as well as you know that about me,” she said softly. “You are no butcher, so what did you think when they butchered my brother? Did you think that was right? Did you think that was fair or just?”

“Don't speak to me of this,” Alec growled, turning to her, fire in his blue eyes. If she had been content with anything less than an admission from him, it would have been enough. She could see the fury in his soul and the doubt there as well, and now he knew she saw it.

“Say it,” she murmured. “Say it, Sir Knight, because you know as well as I do that there was nothing of justice and fairness there. There wasn't any humanity, and if those are the nobles you fight for, if that is the code you want to defend, it will make you no better than them, will it?”

Alec bared his teeth at her in a snarl that made her blood feel too hot in her veins. With a movement too fast to follow with her eyes, his hand lashed out and wrapped tight around her wrist. He pulled her so hard that she almost fell from her mare, but she knew there was no way he would ever let her fall.

“Hold your tongue,” he snarled.

Marilee couldn't take her eyes from his lips, so close and bitten so red. It would have been the work of a moment to lean in toward him, to kiss him, and in that moment, nothing would have stopped her, not the nobles or soldiers watching, not the war, not the fact that he was an English knight and her sworn enemy. She would have claimed his mouth for hers, and she would never have been sorry for it, not to her dying day.

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CHAPTER 35

[illegible]

Somewhere deep in his heart, Alec knew that Marilee was right. He was a knight, sworn by Edward himself on a field of battle when he wasn't much more than sixteen. He had risen from the blood and death of it all straight into the service of the man made king by Heaven itself.

If he had not been made a knight, Alec had no idea what he might have made of his life and his position. He had learned in that battle that he was a good killer. He was a strong fighter with a talent for surviving and for killing the men who wanted to kill him. If he had not been able to devote himself to Edward and the values of the knights of the realm, what in the name of Heaven would he have done with that talent?

He had never had to answer that question before, but with Marilee's eyes on him, her face completely serene and unafraid, he knew the answer: exactly what he was still doing as a knight.

Before he could face that particular bit of treason, however, a

shriek rent the air, and Alec knew in his heart that something was terribly wrong.

A war column was by necessity made up of animals, and some of those animals were campaigners themselves, well used to the rigors and pain of war. Others were fractious and young, more apt to flee than to do anything useful, and still others were simply difficult or vicious. They were not so very different from the men who used them, and in his lighter moments, Alec thought they were identical.

However, there was no human equivalent for what happened when two blooded battle stallions scented a mare in heat and decided that nothing would get in their way of claiming her, not even the train of mules between them. Suddenly, what had been an orderly wagon train became something much more chaotic, and the black and the bay stallions were trumpeting challenges to each other, flailing about them with hooves shod with killing steel.

The mules were getting out of the way, strewing their loads left and right, and in the middle of it all, Alec was shocked to see a young woman looking around, eyes wide and panicked. She was likely with the camp followers, and while she might have known the animals, she had likely never known how hellishly fierce stallions were. Somehow, she had ended up practically under their hooves, and Alec was certain that a moment later, one beast or the other would have cracked her head open.

Then there was a shout by his side, and the reins of Marilee's mount were jerked out of his hand, leaving him swearing in fury. He had one horrified glimpse of woman and mare barreling forward, and then he was after her a moment later.

There was no time to think, no time to do anything but lunge after Marilee, forcing his horse from a dead stop to a full gallop. The gelding was a sturdy beast, and fast, but the only reason it wasn't getting swept off in the tumult was because Alec kept a bruising hard grip on its head. He forced the animal through the chaos, doing it with the instinct of a man who had been to war for most of his life.

The only thing he could see was Marilee's back. The only thing he could do was follow her, make sure that nothing hurt her. He diverted a panicking mule who was headed straight for her, and he gritted his teeth against a wave of sheer panic as she wavered in her seat.

I swear, if I get her out of this, we both live to tell the tale, I will turn her over my knee and beat her until she can't even sit on a horse.

Marilee leaned over when she got to the young girl, throwing out her arm desperately. For a moment, Alec was certain he would see the girl yank Marilee straight off her horse into the stampede. He had seen such things happen enough times. Though Marilee's mare was a likely enough beast, it wasn't trained for battle. It wouldn't stand over Marilee like a brick wall fending off the armed men around her.

Instead, there was a chance it would start to dance and kick as well.

A moment later, the girl was mounted awkwardly behind Marilee, and Marilee was forging ahead, not turning back but seeking the shallowest spot in the chaos to get out of it. Alec followed along as close as he could, keeping himself and his horse between Marilee and the battling stallions. There were hostlers trying to calm them now, but given the fury of stallions trained for battle, it might still be some time before either stud gave up the fight.

It seemed to take ages, but finally, they all emerged onto the green meadow beyond the tumult. Other people gathered there, trying to sort out what could be salvaged from what was damaged beyond repair. People tended injuries close by, and some soldiers were getting a tongue lashing from their commander for a lack of discipline in the ranks. All in all, it was another day in a war column, but Alec couldn't remember the last time he had been this panicked.

She truly has changed everything, he thought broodingly, turning his gaze to Marilee.

Now she was on the ground with the girl she had rescued, and Alec drifted closer on his gelding to hear what she was saying.

“Oh, I think you'll be all right. That's going to bruise up badly, but you are still able to move your arm, aren't you?”

The girl, tearful now that she was safe, nodded.

Marilee smiled.

“If you wanted to be sure, I suppose you could go to the field medics. They may be able to splint it up for you very tight, and that will make you more comfortable at least.”

“No, madame, I would not like to take up time from them that needs it. I should... I should return to the others, begging your pardon...”

“Oh, of course, just be safe. Take the long way around if you need to.”

The girl flashed her a shy smile before she scurried off, and Alec thought in an absent kind of way that Marilee had made another conquest. Then it all shook out of his mind as he dismounted and strode toward the Highland girl.

“Alec!”

Right up until the moment he touched her, right up until he saw the flash of her great gray-green eyes and saw her pale, pale face, Alec had thought he would scream at her, shake her until her teeth rattled, until she swore that she would never behave so recklessly again.

The moment he was close to her, however, all of the terror he had had for her welled up, and he only pulled her into his arms. Heaven above, but she felt so very fragile and small next to him. He

couldn't believe how someone so delicate could do what she did, and it brought another surge of fear up in his soul.

“Dear Heaven, never, ever do anything like that again,” he growled, and she rested her head against his shoulder.

“It wasn't so very much,” she said with a sigh. “But you're right. It was hardly pleasant. Believe me when I say that I have no interest at all in doing that again. Not even a little.”

“You are an utter madwoman, and I have no idea how you survived all this time as you are. Do they breed all the girls like you in the North?”

She leaned back enough to look him in the eye. The bright sparkle took his breath away, and in that moment, he truly understood something he had only suspected at the edges of his soul before.

Saints and powers that be, but I love her...

The thought was greater than the sunrise, more powerful than a storm at sea, and right behind the joy came a swell of pain.

There's nothing for us, is there? There will never be anything for us, never in all the world, and I will live and die with this love to comfort me, because soon enough, she will be gone.

Marilee, of course, had no idea any of this was happening inside

CHAPTER 36

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After everything in the disaster got sorted out, there wasn't much left to do but to set up camp for the night. A wagon train of this sort moved slowly, and that meant it was hardly worth starting again only to stop in a few hours. A small city of sorts sprang up by the side of the road, with drovers, knights, camp followers, nobles, and armorers all settling down to get what rest they could.

Marilee, who was out of place with the men and women of this endeavor, was resigned to staying in one of the tents set up for the knights' women, but just as darkness fell and she was wondering about getting some food from the fires, Alec appeared.

"You move as silently as a cat when you wish to do so," she said.

Though he smiled, he didn't laugh at her pronouncement the way she hoped he would.

"Come walking with me. I can't think you like the noise of camp any more than I do."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she hardly minded, but something in his eyes put a hook in her soul and pulled. She could no more say no to him than she could say no to falling if she stepped off of the cliff, and with a tremulous smile, she put her hand in his.

He led her straight out of camp toward the dark forest beyond, and in less time than she could believe, they had left the noise and the chaos of the camp behind them. The sun had set, leaving nothing but soft purplish streaks in the sky. Alec moved through the gloaming like a cat, surefooted enough that they threaded their way through the trees, deeper into the forest.

Marilee thought she should ask where they were going, but a reckless part of her didn't care. Right now, after all the tumult of the day and the fear and panic that had come with rescuing that poor girl, it was enough to follow Alec wordlessly through the tall trees until they came to a break in the woods.

It was a natural paddock, the grass grown tall and lovely, and at the center of it was a natural cropping of stone, rising up bigger than a cottage from the land.

“What is it?” Marilee asked, her voice hushed.

“I’ve come through the area a few times. This is where I like to stay if I can. Here, let me show you.”

The lee of the stone was a sandy space, Marilee realized. The

rock hanging overhead sheltered it from the elements, and there was a small ring of rocks with a blackened center, where Alec had had a fire before and built one now. She sat quietly as he worked, watching as he spread a blanket down on the ground.

“What are we doing here?” she asked, a strange hollowness in her own voice.

“Whatever we want. Whatever *you* want.”

He came to sit next to her, and Marilee knew what she should have said and done next. She should have demanded to be taken back to the camp. She should have told him they could have nothing together, not again. That it would break her heart.

Then she realized it would break her heart anyway if she did not touch him when she could, if she did not kiss him when she could. With a soft and needy sound, she reached for him, and he took her into his arms.

When she tugged on his clothes, Alec rose and stripped for her, and in the flickering light of the fire, he was so beautiful she had to catch his breath. In the dimness, she could feel the scars that crisscrossed his flesh under her fingers, and there was something perfect about them as well.

“How strong you must be to survive all of this,” she murmured.

He laughed a little.

“You are a bigger risk to me than all of the rest put together. I have never known danger like what I have risked when I am with you.”

He pulled her into his arms for a kiss, and somehow, it was like none of the other kisses they had shared before. This kiss took its time. She thought he was enjoying her mouth, but then she realized there was something else to it as well.

He's memorizing me, she thought with an ache that ran all the way through her. He is storing up these sensations for when I am no longer here... when we are no longer together.

She pushed it away. There was no time and no place for sorrow now, nothing but the feel of their bodies on each other, their mouths devouring each other, their hands given license to rove wherever they wanted, because there were no laws in this place.

Alec's clever hands worked at her laces, and with another few moments, her dress and her chemise were lifted from her body all at once, leaving her to lie naked on the blanket in front of him.

She started to reach for him, but then to her surprise, he pressed her down to the blanket again.

“Shh. Just let me have you. I promise I will make you feel so

good.”

She sighed, relaxing back against the wool, and Alec loomed over her, his mouth pressed against her throat before moving down her body. Her desire was already burning gently inside her, making her whimper as he touched her. His hands were so gentle, running from her shoulders all the way down to her fingertips before coming back, and when he nuzzled at the dip of her waist and the round curve of her belly, it was just barely on the edge of ticklish but oh, so good.

Alec gasped a little when he ran his fingers down between her legs, and for a moment, Marilee was confused. Then she remembered and laughed.

“They told me it was the style at court,” she said, and Alec shook his head.

“You’re going to be the death of me, woman,” he retorted, and then he was gliding his hand over her smooth mound and the slit below. She whimpered when she realized how very much more she could feel and how very sensitive she was now. It was good, it was all so perfect and good, and the only thing that mattered was how Alec touched her. The pleasure that coursed through her body was surely a holy thing. It made her feel as if she could fly, as if there was nothing in the world that could ever bring her to earth again.

She tensed as that fire started to gather and pool at the bottom of her belly. She knew what that meant, the sublime pleasure that was

waiting for her, but she pushed Alec's hand away.

“Too much?” he asked, his voice rough and hoarse. “Too fast?”

“Never,” she promised him. “Only I don't want it like that.”

“And how do you want it, then?”

“With you.”

Always with you. Please. Always with you...

Alec made a soft amused sound, and he leaned up to kiss her again. When he took his fingers from her soft flesh, she keened a little but now he was lying down beside her, gesturing her up.

“Here. You'll like this; I am sure of it.”

He brought her to straddle his hips, and a moment later, she understood what he meant and a red blush suffused her face.

“I... can we?”

“Of course. Don't worry. I'll help you.”

He did, his hands on her hips, and his deep voice whispering encouragement in the darkness. She bit her lip as she felt the blunt tip of his manhood pressed against her opening. She couldn't help teasing him a little as she squirmed above him, and then suddenly, she could

not bear to be without him any longer.

In one sleek and smooth movement, she slid down on his manhood, taking him completely inside her, and they both moaned at the sensation of it, the pleasure that coursed through them, the feeling of utter completion.

Biting her lip, Marilee started to rock against Alec's body, but before those shivers could grow, he raised his knees so she could lean against them, pushing her back.

“Alec?”

“Here... Let me touch you...”

When she was leaned back against his knees, it gave him total access to the place where their bodies joined. She shifted a little, sending a tremor of sensation through him, and his deft fingers were on her, working at that sensitive little nubbin of flesh at the apex of her folds. Marilee felt as if her entire body had set on fire, and she reached behind her, digging her nails into Alec's legs, moaning.

Her body writhed on his, tightening around the hard column of his manhood as he touched her. She could feel his hips start to push up into her, and she spared a thought for how strong he was, able to thrust into her from this position even as his fingers coaxed the pleasure in her higher and higher.

“Oh... Oh, Alec, please, don't stop, never stop...”

“Oh, darling, I never could...”

He was relentless, and though a part of her wanted nothing more than to draw out the pleasure and savor it, all she could do was hang on. The sensations carried her along with them, and sooner than she would have imagined possible, they drowned her entirely, the pleasure consuming her, her body tightening beyond what she thought it could bear and then loosing with a tide of need and desire that left her in tears.

Alec growled like a beast, his hands coming up to grasp her hips, and with two hard thrusts, he spilled inside her. She had wanted him with her, and this was as close as they could be, exhausted, panting, and needy as he brought her down to rest against his chest.

She returned to her body slowly, gradually becoming more aware of the warmth of Alec's body below her and the cool breeze at her back. He was stroking her hair gently, her face pressed against his neck and her body resting against his like it would rest on a mattress.

She thought she could stay like that forever, but she knew she couldn't. With a wince, she sat up and drew away from him to kneel on the blanket, reaching for her clothes.

“Come away with me,” Alec said.

She stared at him.

“What?”

“Come away with me. We can leave. Tonight. We can leave it all behind. We can go north, where I know plenty of people, or we can go south to the continent where no one knows us. Please. We do not have to be these people any longer.”

For a wonderful and blinding moment, she almost said yes. Then Marilee realized that no matter where she went, she would still be Marilee MacPherson, and if she left now, she would be nothing but a traitor, both to her family and to her brother.

“No,” she said. “You know I won’t.”

Alec was silent, and when he turned from her, she dressed. When they were both decent, she took his hand again, and they returned to the encampment, where he left her without a single word.

It startled Marilee that seemingly no time had passed at all. People were still cooking, still settling their animals, talking to one another as if the world had just gone on rolling in her absence.

Marilee smiled at that rather self-centered thought, and then suddenly she turned, listening to a scrap of gossip from one of the fires. All of the pleasure in her body turned to iron-hard needles, and she began to shake. She listened again, and again, it came.

CHAPTER 37

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Alec had plenty to keep him busy in the long march north. There was gear to look over, men to keep in line, and of course, the thousand and one other things that had to be tended to before an army even made it to the battleground. It was work he had done for years, work he was good at, work that stretched from the time he woke in the morning until the time he lay down at night.

So why was it he could not keep his thoughts from Marilee?

Every time he paused, every time his mind was actually not focused on the business of keeping himself and his men alive, she appeared. She haunted him, her eyes, her face, the pleasure he gave her at night below the rock and the pleasure he took in his turn.

Alec felt like a man obsessed, and he made it his business to stay away from the places in the camp where she stayed.

He might have been able to keep from seeing her, but he found in relatively short order that he could not keep from hearing about

her. Everyone in the entire blasted war column had heard of her rescue of the young camp follower, and while some detractors chalked it up to her barbaric upbringing, others were simply impressed by her bravery and riding prowess.

Alec heard about how she must be some kind of princess to the Northern tribes, while others claimed she was intended for marriage with a seafaring prince from points even more frozen. Some of the stories were ridiculous, some almost plausible, and Alec would have laughed at them all if Marilee hadn't been at the center of it.

He hadn't forgotten how she had put herself right at the center of this lot of nobles and knights. He still believed she was playing her own game, but at this point, he had no idea what it might be. As she had predicted, Edward had waved off his warnings, and almost everyone he had spoken to about Marilee found her a delight, something far too small and sweet to be a threat.

You saw her ride into a stampede to protect a young girl, Alec found himself wanting to shout. Do you somehow think that that will and that fury cannot be turned against you?

He was realizing, however, that his countrymen had a blind spot when it came to Marilee, and in turn, that forced him to realize that they had a blind spot when it came to the North. They seemed to think that the Highland tribes were dangerous on the field, but off it so primitive and frankly stupid that they could never be a threat.

They see her as some kind of trained animal that will cuddle up to them and purr. They don't realize she's watching them and...

And what?

He still had no idea. He kept an eye on the food supplies, and he made sure she was never anywhere near the weaponry, but beyond that, Alec knew he wasn't meant to have any contact with her. It was bad enough when he caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye or when he rode past her in the column.

"You are ignoring me," Marilee said one afternoon, three days after they had had their encounter by the sheltering rock.

"Should I not, madame?" he asked, but he slowed his chestnut to let her ride next to him.

"We have too much history to pretend that it is nothing," she said.

Alec gave her a cold glance.

"We have too much history to do anything but. Marilee, you must know that there can be nothing between us."

"No," she said calmly. "We have no future, none at all. But right in this moment, we have each other."

"What does that mean?" he asked, and a chill ran up his spine.

“It means that right now, we have the sky, these horses, the wind, and each other. We can see each other, we smile and laugh... we can touch each other.”

She reached out to brush her fingertips across his bare hand, and the sensation it sent through him was like a searing fire. Seeing her and not being able to have her was a pure pain, and he jerked his hand away.

“We can't,” he said, and he pulled the chestnut's head away.

“Alec,” she cried out after him, but he rode ahead.

When Alec couldn't sleep that night, he went walking among the long lines of tethered horses. He wondered how far he could get if he took one of the stallions and rode it all the way to the sea in the west. There were traders there who were always looking to bring fresh bloodstock to France or Germany. He could barter one of the stallions for a ship's berth to a place where he had never been before, and he would never think of any of this again.

He realized with a heavy heart, however, that it didn't matter. Even if he never saw Marilee again, her loss would always live inside him. That was how he was made, and he accepted it.

When he finally slept, Alec's dreams were thin and strange. Someone was calling for him desperately, but no matter what he did or where he looked, he couldn't find them.

CHAPTER 38

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Marilee felt like a wolf stuck in a cage.

In the North, the clans lived in uneasy peace with the wolves. The vicious animals stayed in the high crags and the forests, killing the weaker deer, the rabbits, and the wild sheep. It was only when they ventured into the fertile valleys that they had to be dealt with, and when Marilee was seven, one old wolf had started to kill lambs.

They'd caught him alive in a trap, a wooden barred thing barely bigger than he was, and Marilee's heart, tender and unused, had ached to see the wild fear and almost human understanding in his wild eyes.

It was over. He was going to die.

When Lord Branford came into the war camp, he was greeted by the people who had been so friendly with her for the past few days as if he were a hero. From her place at the back, she stared at him, making sure the hatred she felt could not be seen on her face.

Lord Branford was a big bluff man, almost as big as Alec, and a

touch of gray at his temples gave him a distinguished air. He greeted the people around him with an unctuous air, but she saw how harsh he was with his servants, how the camp followers in his war train refused to get close to him. Yes, she could see this was the man who had ordered that terrible death for her brother, and so Marilee set to work, spending more time close to his camp and learning its rhythms as they went farther north. She learned of their habits, that Lord Branford liked his wine more than a good lord ought. She learned that he had girls sent to his tent as if they were part of his dinner, and more often than not, they left in the night, crying and in pain.

Good. That is a way in.

A week later, she was ready, all except for Alec. When she thought about Alec, her heart wrenched. It was the last thing she should be doing, the absolute last thing she should even be thinking, but she had to see him one last time.

It was almost a relief when he turned away from her. That night in the field under the rocks, she had almost given in and gone with him. She didn't know what she might have done if he had asked her again, but the blast of cold she had felt from his rejection left her strong even if a part of her felt the pain of it like burning.

My love, I am sorry. In another time, in another life...

She didn't finish that thought. The die had been cast and her course set.

That night, Marilee found the young girl who had been sent for, pacing just beyond the fires and wringing her hands.

“You've been relieved,” Marilee said softly. “Stay at the fires tonight.”

The young girl, pale and no more than fifteen, looked at Marilee with wide eyes.

“But...”

“I have a debt to pay,” Marilee said. The girl would think she was one of the fallen women who followed the army, the ones who sold themselves for a night of pleasure in the hope of securing some kind of place for themselves. It was likely enough that one of them would try to gain the favor of a lord.

The girl nodded and darted away, and Marilee's heart beat faster as she made her way to Lord Bradford's tent.

It felt strange to be in the abode of her enemy after all this time. It struck her how human he was, how he had blankets and gear and frivolous luxuries like rugs and torches like everyone else. It did not soften her resolve, and the knife concealed in her skirts was a welcome weight against her thigh.

“Well, well. I was wondering how long it might take before you appeared here to me.”

She heard the drunken slur in Lord Branford's voice as the tent flap fell shut behind him, and then she turned and was faced with the man who had ordered her brother's humiliating death.

“My lord,” she said, forcing herself to curtsy low to him. “I don't know what you mean.”

“You think you are clever? I know the name of the MacPherson war leader, and I know that his sister is a hostage here. What game are you playing, little one? Hm?”

He stumbled toward her, and she could see there was a shake in his hands that was not visible from a distance. He did not look old, but he had an old man's tremor.

“I... I wished to speak to you, my lord,” she said, refusing to move as he lumbered close to her.

“Who would think that MacPherson had such a beautiful sister?” Branford mused, almost to himself. “Too delicate by far for war. Far too soft for what happened to her brother. Never think of it, and let me put better thoughts in your head...”

He thought he had cornered her against the bed, and Marilee allowed him to touch her cheek with his puffy hand. She thought her skin might crawl straight off her body, but she bore it as well as she could, her face a perfect mask.

“Tell me,” she said, her voice soft. “Tell me, why did you do such a thing to my brother? Tell me why you ordered him that shameful death.”

“I sent his head back, did I not?” Branford asked. “I did not have to.”

“It was a death for a criminal,” Marilee said, her voice low and growing harder. “He did not deserve that. He was an honorable man.”

Branford lurched for her, his bulk carrying them both to the bed. It creaked under their weight, and Marilee gasped. Her skirts tangled around her legs. For a moment, she was sure she had lost track of her knife.

“He wasn't. He attacked in the night, like a criminal.”

“No. Not David. He would never. You are a liar.”

Branford was reaching for her, and he found her breast just as she found her knife. She freed it and drew it across his shoulder with one quick motion. It was a deep cut, welling blood instantly and Lord Branford groaned.

“You mewling—”

“Tell me,” she said, kicking him hard so he tumbled out of the bed. She tumbled after him, landing with her knees hard on his thighs, pinning him into place. “Tell me. Tell me the truth, for once in your

life.”

He cursed at her and with a shudder, she drove the knife into his chest. She wanted the truth, but more than that, she wanted the man who had killed her brother dead. She thought she would not get both, but then she did.

“I killed him in ambush,” the lord snarled. “He died surprised and howling like a dog, and then I sent his parts to all four corners.”

The lord choked on his own blood, and sickened, pale with shock, Marilee stumbled away from him. She could hear shouting outside the tent, but she could not take her eyes away from Lord Branford's body on the ground. Killing her captor at the burning wagon had been different. That had been an act of vicious self-defense. This was cold. Heaven above, she was so cold, so terribly cold. Would she ever be warm again?

Then the tent flap was thrown aside and soldiers came in. The commotion threatened to deafen her, but then there were hard hands around her arms, ropes, ropes binding her down. She could hear the people around her screaming, and then she was dragged into the cold night air. There was a blur of faces, of fires, and she would have fallen if there were not so many people all around her, their hands on her holding her up.

The first slap took her by surprise, turning her face to one side, and then there was a punch to her gut. Her eyes watered, and she

stared up at the starry sky.

Alec.

[illegible]

CHAPTER 39

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Rage coursed through Alec's body, pure rage and a kind of violence he had never thought himself capable of. He had been a soldier all of his adult life, but at the same time, he had never considered himself to be a monster. Soldiers killed, but they killed men on the field. They did what they had to do to survive and to make sure that their side advanced, or failing that, they affected a retreat that had as few casualties as possible.

They did not cause death where it was needless, and they did not treat their enemies as less than beasts to be slaughtered out of hand.

In the space of a few moments, all of Alec's discipline and beliefs about battle went straight out the window, and he could have killed everyone who stood between him and Marilee, no matter who they were.

Instead, Alec took a deep breath, assumed his most foreboding expression and went to find out what he needed to know. There was to be nothing gained by simply charging in and getting himself

dismissed as a fool or a madman. Instead, he strode through the camp, avoiding those who had more rank than he did and finding out what had happened from other sources. He had to believe that Marilee was safe until he had completed his investigation. Edward was not a man who would hang a murderer out of hand, no matter what had happened.

There would be a trial. There might be an ordeal. There might be torture, and no matter how the thought turned Alec's stomach, that meant that there was time.

And for every terrible thing she has suffered, I will visit that on these people ten-fold. It was a shocking thought, but one that would not leave him. It did not matter who Marilee had killed or what she had done. Nothing in the world was going to prevent him from keeping her safe, from making sure she lived. Nothing else, not even his own life, or perhaps more significantly, his own honor, mattered.

All that mattered was Marilee.

Alec knew he would only have one chance at this rescue. It would have been one thing if it was a fight. Alec would take his chances on one on one combat with any man in Edward's army. However, it wasn't that. It was a mass of soldiers, and it wasn't like he was going to be able to take them on one at a time.

Instead of charging into the tent where they had penned Marilee, he returned to his own tent, strapping on his armor and over it, the

quilted red surcoat bearing the black bear, his family's coat of arms. It was designed to mark him as a knight and a noble right away, even to the people who did not know his face, and unless he was on the field, he did not care to wear it. This was different, however, and as he strode through the camp, he made sure that people knew he was on official business.

With some relief, Alec realized that he recognized the two men who guarded Marilee's tent. They saluted him sharply, and he nodded at them.

“I'm here to bring the prisoner to the king,” he said.

The two men gave each other a sidelong look that he did not like.

“What?” he snapped. “Do you have something to say to me?”

“Well, sir,” said the braver one. “It is only that you may need a litter for her, or a wagon or somethin’ else to carry her. She could not walk when they brought her here.”

Alec's temper rose up again, and he almost drew his sword and killed the man where he stood. It did not matter to him how innocent the man might have been or how little he might have had to do with Marilee's current state.

“Then you had better bring me a wagon or a litter or somethin’

else, hadn't you?" Alec snarled. "If you think I'm in a foul mood, then you should see Edward this fine morning."

The two men paled, saluting hastily and moving away as Alec came into the tent. It took him a few moments to adjust his eyes to the dimness inside, and he was startled to see that Marilee was not alone.

Marilee sat with her leg out flat in front of her, wincing as another girl knelt over it.

"Oh, saints suffering in Heaven," Marilee groaned through gritted teeth, and Alec felt that deep violence rise again until he saw that the girl was trying to tie up her leg. He calmed himself down, because that kind of rage was not going to serve anyone that day, and he knelt next to Marilee.

"Alec!"

"Show me how to help," Alec said urgently, and the girl looked up at him in surprise. She was a thin thing, slightly bony in the face with black hair in a long braid over her shoulder and eyes the liquid black that Alec had seen a time or two with the beauties of Spain.

"Here. Hold her hips like this so she will not turn as I tie this up. It is not a break, I do not think, but it is a sprain that is just as bad."

Alec nodded curtly, turning to Marilee.

"This is going to hurt. Brace yourself."

Marilee's face was terribly pale, but she nodded, pressing her face against Alec's shoulder as he held her steady. He felt the jerk go through her entire body as the strange girl tied up Marilee's leg.

"Alec, what are you doing here?" Marilee asked between panting gasps for breath.

He offered her a slight smile.

"Offering you a chance to get out of here. Will you come with me now?"

She stared at him, and he saw all he had ever hoped for in her eyes.

"Still? Even after I..."

"Yes," he said. "Always you. Only you. I am getting you out of here."

"You'll need a distraction," said the girl who had helped set Marilee's leg.

Alec turned to her with a frown.

"You sound like you are looking to get paid."

She offered him a smile.

“I don't work for free,” she said briskly. “Well, I set this one's leg for nothing because it's a sorry thing when a trickster like her can't run free, and she made my heart full sore as I heard her trying to be so brave. But that's all I'll do for nothing today, especially if the English army is so very hell-bent on blood today.”

“Thief,” Marilee said approvingly, and Alec rather thought Marilee was right.

The war had ripped through the borderlands, and everyone was surviving as best they could. An able-bodied man could go swing a sword for the army or for a mercenary company if he was in any way competent with a blade, but the elderly, the very young, the infirm, and of course, the women often had to catch as catch can. He hadn't seen this girl around the camp before, though war columns picked up people and lost them with a fair degree of regularity. This girl looked like a clever thing with a plan of her own, and right now, he couldn't fault that.

Alec nodded.

“All right. You cause enough of a distraction for us to get out of the camp, you can go back to my tent and take whatever you like from there, and you can be sure that no one will ever trouble you for it.”

The girl's eyes glittered like gold, and the smile that stretched across her face had a kind of recklessness that would have been the

mark of a daring soldier if she were a man.

“Done and done. All right. That's a deal, sir. I'll be off.”

She hesitated, and Alec could see something of the girl she had been before whatever trouble it was had taken her life away.

“Both of you be careful,” she said quietly. “The people here, they're in a killing mood, or so it feels to me.”

She lifted up a corner of the tent canvas and was gone.

Alec turned to Marilee.

“Can you stand?”

He could see the bruises that marred her face, the pained way she moved, but she staggered to her feet with a nod.

“I'll have to,” she said with a game smile.

Alec had to fight back the urge to both strangle her and kiss her at once. For just a blinding flash of a moment, he wondered what it would be like if they actually did make their escape, somehow did get away from it all. It would be madness.

And I love her all the more for it. For the first time since he had heard of what she had done, he felt something lighten a little at the center of his chest.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll be with you all the way. We’re getting out of here.”

The smile she gave him was as bright as the sun, and she nodded.

With help, he realized that she could hobble with at least a little speed, and he started to wonder if they might get away with this after all.

“Sir Alec...”

He turned to see the two guards he had sent away returned with a wagon faster than he had thought they would.

“Oh,” he said, momentarily at a loss, and then there was a shrill scream and the scent of smoke in the air.

Did... did that girl cause a fire and a stampede? Alec wondered briefly, and then he wheeled toward the men with the wagon.

“Go and help put that out!” he roared, and apparently, he was fearsome enough that they abandoned the wagon and immediately ran toward the sound of the commotion.

“I hope she’s going to be all right,” Marilee said, wide-eyed.

Alec shook his head.

“She made a bargain, and if she gets away with it, she will have plenty of my gear to sell. Besides, I already have one madwoman to handle, and that is plenty.”

“Who would that be?” Marilee asked innocently, and Alec couldn't help a brief laugh as he started hurrying her toward the edge of camp, where he had their horses tethered.

“If you don't know, I'm not going tell you,” he said. “Come on.”

This is farther than I expected to get. Alec felt slightly light-headed as they came to the horses. He had seen the loaded down with gear and food. Their chances for a getaway were still slight, but he thought that perhaps they were better now.

“You really did plan this all out, didn't you?” Marilee said, looking startled.

Alec offered her a shaky grin as he hoisted her on top of her mare.

“Well, you had your plan, and I had to come up with mine on the spot. Believe me when I say that we will be talking about all of this if we are not both hung by sundown.”

To his surprise, Marilee's face softened. He was still worried about how her body swayed in the saddle and how very pale he could see her face was under the bruises, but her beauty could still take his

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In the end, much to Marilee's frustration and helpless fury, she couldn't stay on her mare for very long. The injuries she had taken had tired her, and the ache was enough to make her grit her teeth against the pain. She knew that if she pulled up her dress to look, her entire body would be mottled black and blue from the beating she had taken before the guards decided she should stand proper trial.

Then she had spent the remainder of the night in the tent with her arms tied, and relief had only come with the nameless thief who had come in to offer her some comfort. Wherever that woman was now, Marilee hoped and prayed she would be safe in all the tumult. She had seen the kind of rage in the faces of the crowd before, and if they could not find Marilee herself, they might be happy with some girl with no connections.

Then her mare had taken a brief slope too fast, and Marilee had to hang on for dear life.

All things considered, I had probably better keep my prayers for

myself.

She must have gasped or groaned at the slight upset because suddenly Alec was bringing his horse around.

“Come on,” he said. “You’re riding with me.”

Marilee started to protest, but finally, she nodded because Alec was right. She couldn’t necessarily be trusted to keep her seat on the mare, and if she fell, then it would only mean more injuries, more delays, and a greater chance that they would be caught. She wanted to fight, but instead, she nodded, more falling out of the saddle than dismounting. She would have hit the ground hard if Alec wasn’t there to take her in his arms. For just a moment, they stood still, relishing the heat and the warmth of each other’s bodies, likely relishing as well the fact that they were not dead yet or caught.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured as they hobbled toward his chestnut. “I’m nothing but trouble for you.”

“And if I wanted a peaceful life, I would become a monk on the coast and never speak save to pray,” Alec retorted. “Right now, terribly enough, this is precisely where I want to be. With you.”

She had told him that she loved him, and though she longed to hear it back, she realized that with everything he did, every word he spoke to her, he was already saying it. Something in her opened up that had been closed before, and she smiled through the pained wince

as he lifted her up into the saddle. He took the time to rearrange the gear so that it would be better balanced, and even if she thought she could hear the sounds of pursuit mounting behind her, she knew that it was a necessity.

“If we have to leave the mare or send her downriver to muddy the trail for us, this will be better,” Alec said, and he mounted up in front of her.

Marilee almost groaned with relief when she leaned forward against Alec's back, clasping her hands around his waist.

“Feel all right?” Alec asked.

“No, but this is the most that I have any right to expect,” she said, pressing her face against his shoulder. “You feel so very good.”

“Good. It won't last; we have to get going again.”

“So very cheerfully,” she said, wincing as he kicked the chestnut into a canter. Her own horse, on a lead, trailed behind, and for a short time, she simply lost herself to the haze of pain that was her body.

It was strange. When they had been beating her, she had given herself up to it. There was no thought in her head of surviving the death of Branford, nothing to her at all beyond getting revenge for her brother and his memory. Then they had somehow stopped, and all of the pain had set in. She was in her body, and of her body again, and

suddenly, she hadn't wanted to die.

“How do soldiers do it?” she found herself asking Alec quietly. “How in the world do they go into battle every time ready to die, and then how do they learn to live again after they have made themselves right with it?”

She thought Alec wasn't going to answer her; after all, it was a rather daft question that she wasn't sure why she had asked in the first place, but he made a considering sound.

“No soldier goes into battle thinking he will die,” Alec said with a slightly scornful tone to his voice. “Not a single one. Some of us might say that we do, but that is only... hm, something like bragging to quiet the fear and the terror of it all. Soldiers brag a great deal. We say many things in order to make it to the battle.”

“Really? Even you?”

“Oh, certainly me,” Alec said, his voice surprisingly light. “Before a battle, I only think about killing the man in front of me who wants to kill me. I do not think about what it might be like to die, or to prepare myself for it. Not like you did. You've been thinking about yourself as a dead woman the whole time I have known you, haven't you?”

The question was uttered so softly she almost missed it. It seemed like such a strange thing for him to ask her, but then when she

realized the import of it, she shut her eyes against the pain.

“I'm sorry,” she said quietly. “I never thought I would be able to say that to you. I never thought that I would be able to say it to any Englishman, but it is true. I am sorry for what I have made you feel and what you have lost because of me.”

“I don't want your sorry,” Alec said, a hard note in his voice this time.

Alec had been acting so smoothly, with such a degree of control and competence that she had not heard the stress in his voice before that. Now, however, this small statement had shaken and possibly broken something in him. She could feel him going hard against her, and she jumped a little.

“Alec?”

“I don't want you to be sorry,” he repeated. “I want you to tell me that you will never decide such a thing like that again. I want you to realize that you are worth so much more than your revenge against the English, no matter what they have taken from you or how they have hurt you. I would have you live, no matter what comes.”

“Alec, you must know...”

“No,” he said again. “No. I have not done this for you to throw your life away. If you want to thank me, if you want to say sorry to

me, I want you to swear to me that you will live, and that you will do everything you can to survive.”

The silence between them stretched out, so painful Marilee had to shut her eyes against it. She had not thought that her journey would have casualties beyond her own life. She had not thought that she would hurt anyone else, and now she realized how very wrong she was.

“I... I don't know if I can promise you that,” she said, her voice soft and small.

Alec sighed, a heaviness to it that seemed as if it must surely weigh down his soul. It felt like something that would crush him under its weight if she did not find a way to lift it up.

However, right now, when her body felt as if it would topple right from the back of his horse if she did not pay attention, she knew she could not make that promise. There were no promises she could make to him right now, as broken as she felt, not when the English were closing in behind them. Not when at any moment they might simply be taken and killed.

“You left everything for me,” she said. “You lost everything for me...”

“I have not left or lost anything that compares to what I have now,” Alec said. “I gave Edward and England everything I was for a

very long time, and now I am done giving it to them simply because they ask.”

Marilee's breath caught in her throat because she knew who he was giving his life to now. She knew, but neither of them could say it yet, not until they were safe, not until there was more time, more space, more everything between them and what she had done.

I cannot keep myself safe for myself. I do not know if I have that in me. But I know that I will keep myself safe for him.

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Alec knew that the more distance they put between themselves and the English, the better it would be, and the better their chances for an actual escape would become. The distraction caused by the stampede and fire that the nameless thief who had helped them had set would only last for so long, and sooner rather than later, they would realize what had happened.

He pushed himself, Marilee, and their horses north as long and as hard as he dared, but he knew that as the night loomed in front of them that the way would grow more treacherous and not less. Sooner or later, they would stumble, they would fall, and when that happened, it might leave them hurt and in even worse straits.

There was a little bit of starlight and then some moonlight, and finally, when the mare stumbled a second time, and when Marilee almost slipped off behind him, Alec realized they would have to stop or be stopped.

“No fire tonight,” he said. “Nothing that might give away our

position. They can't travel at night any more than we can, but there is no reason to give them a map to our location with the woodsmoke."

He knew that Marilee was done in, because she didn't have an answer for him beyond a weary nod. He helped her down off the horse, tethering them both close by. He was ill-using them both, but he knew that at the moment, he had no real choice.

Marilee had mostly fallen where he had laid her down, but she managed to spread out their blankets on the ground.

"Not much to do besides sleep," she murmured.

"Here. You need some kind of food..."

"I feel like I am much too sore to eat it," she grumbled, and after a moment, Alec realized she was telling the truth. One of her hands was bruised and swollen, and he winced at how long she must have hung on to the reins of the mare in spite of it.

"You should have told me about this before," he said.

"What good would it have done?"

"I always want to know, even if I cannot do any good," he said gently. "You never know. I may find a way."

He could almost hear her smile at that.

“You do have a way of pulling miracles out of nowhere, it is true,” she said.

In the end, he sat down next to her and cut small pieces from a sausage with his knife. She made a disgusted noise as he popped one of the salty pieces into her mouth, but then she sighed as she ate it.

“It’ll be better if you can eat and keep it down,” Alec said, cutting her off another slice. “You may not be hungry, but you need your strength.”

“I’m starving,” she said wistfully, “but I wish it wasn’t sausage we were eating.”

“Oh? What is it you would rather be having?”

“Oh, that’s a question, isn’t it? Hmm. Up in the North, we have a dish that’s just broiled barley porridge, but it’s cooked with some blackberries and some honey. It’s simple, but it is so good, and it was all I ever thought about when I first came out on the road.”

Alec laughed a little.

“That sounds like something we give to children in the South.”

“Well, it is where I am from as well,” she said a little indignantly. “But it’s still good.”

She paused for a moment, and when she spoke, it was with more

shyness than Alec had ever heard her speak before.

“I would make it for you. If we came to the North, and I could find the right kind of berries.”

It struck Alec that that was the first time either of them had spoken of any kind of future, of anything that might hint toward a time after their current flight. It was hope, and it felt so terribly fragile, like it was too much to hope for, too much to even want.

“I would like that,” Alec said finally. “It’s hard to think about you as a cook though.”

Marilee snorted at that.

“Oh, but I am. I’m the laird’s daughter after all. I knew how to cook and to oversee cooking enough for a clan gathering. I know not only how to weave but how to get a good price for the weaving when I’m done. What, did you think I emerged into the world hungry for a bloody revenge against the English?”

“No more than I sprang from the blood of a battlefield hungry for the glory of England,” Alec responded.

She was silent so long he thought she must have fallen asleep. On the blanket next to her, he didn’t dare touch her for fear he would bring greater pain to her bruises or cuts. He thought no matter how exhausted he was that he would never sleep, but he was just drifting

off when she spoke again.

“Tell me what you like best,” she murmured, her voice soft. They might have been in the softest bed under a sturdy thatch roof instead of on the run and pressed under a drooping tree.

“That could take a while,” he said. “What do you mean?”

“To eat, of course. Though I certainly would not mind hearing the rest of what you like best if you wanted to offer it to me.”

“I'm not sure that anyone has ever asked me that before,” Alec admitted.

Marilee made a soft huff of disappointment.

“What terrible people you must have had in your life before. Think about it and tell me now.”

Alec did think about it, and from a lifetime of war and privation, he came up with a memory that seemed to gleam in his mind.

“All right. One Christmas, I found myself at the house of a lord in the South. He had opened his house to all of the neighboring nobility, and I suppose he was rich enough that he did not have to worry about one more poor soldier at his board. I was seated at the table like any other lordling, and they had chicken.”

“Chicken doesn't seem so very hard.”

“I doubt it was. It was chicken stuffed with barley, nuts, and berries. Someone told me it had been roasted in clay if you can believe it, until the meat fell apart and took on the flavor of... oh, I don't know. Walnuts. Blueberries. Even some wine, though I am not sure how they accomplished that.”

Marilee was silent for such a while that he thought she might have fallen asleep, and then she laughed softly.

“Oh, It might take me a few tries, but I am certain I could make that dish for you. I know I could.”

“Even with the clay? That sounds ridiculous.”

“My Uncle Benji traveled far and wide in his youth. He mentioned something about people in the distant south who baked their meat like that, and how you would crack the clay with a hammer before you could eat it. I'm sure he could help.”

Alec couldn't resist and pulled her gently toward him, burying his face in her hair. He could smell blood and smoke and leather, but underneath it was Marilee's own scent. She was his, and he knew that never in this world or the next would he suffer her to be taken away from him.

“I'll hold you to that,” he said, his voice oddly tight. “After this is all over, you will take me north, and you will make me both your child's porridge and a dish that you have only had described to you by

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Marilee heard the soldiers before Alec did. He had moved a short way off to look over the horses, and she was still trying to find her feet. She was slowly coming to realize that she would heal, that the damage they had done to her was something she would overcome, even if she ached for months, even if she would have to be careful in the time to come for fear of hurting herself worse.

There may be an after, she thought with some surprise. There may be something after this for both of us.

She allowed herself a short while to marvel at that thought, to think about what it would be like to bring Alec up north and to show him what life might be without the specter of war hanging over him. It brought a warmth to her she wasn't sure she had ever felt before. It was different even from the passion they had felt for one another. That was a heady bonfire of a thing, throwing sparks high up into the sky. This felt more like the fire on the hearth, burning slowly and steadily, something they could use to warm each other for years to come.

Then she heard the hoofbeats clattering from the rocky ground above them, and she realized that it was over.

It was a beautiful dream, wasn't it?

If she thought about it too long, Marilee was certain she would cry. She had not cried for the beating. She had not cried when one of the English soldiers told her she would be burned for her murder. She knew, however, that she would cry for Alec and for the life she knew he wanted and that they would never have.

As she made her way to the far edge of the clearing, toward where she could hear the hoofbeats, she was glad that she had told him she loved him, even if he had not said the words in return. This way, whatever life was in front of him, he would have them to carry with him until he found someone else. That ached, but she could live with it if he was a little safer. If he could live a little longer.

They had crossed a long rocky spot the night before, and she knew that that was where the English had followed them. By the time she came to that spot, she was exhausted and sore, and the English soldiers, a band of around a dozen or so, were at the far edge. She saw the moment they spotted her, and she raised her arms to show that they were empty.

I do not know what threat they might think I am, as injured as I am, but every little bit helps.

With her hands still upraised, she started toward them. Every step felt like a betrayal, but if she could get to them, if she could let them take her, then perhaps Alec would be spared. Perhaps he would be able to move away from all this. Perhaps he would never know what had happened to her.

She came to the center of the open rocky space when one of the English soldiers broke ranks. There was an ugly light in his face, and she wondered if he had been one of Lord Branford's men, or whether there was some other grudge he bore against her or her blood.

The hoofbeats of the English soldier's horse filled her ears. She saw him speed up, and for a moment, she wondered if he was going to ride her down. She braced herself, ready to throw herself to the right or the left if she had to. Perhaps he only meant to scare her, but accidents happened with far less malice.

He was so close she could feel the ground shake underneath her feet when he sawed back on his horse's reins, a look of terror on his face.

Marilee turned just in time to see Alec riding down toward her on the frantic chestnut, sword bare in his fist and a look on his face like that of an avenging angel. If Marilee hadn't loved Alec as well as she did, she knew it would have terrified her out of her wits.

He slewed the chestnut in a circle around her, and then he was onto the man who had been riding her down. The English soldier had

managed to get his horse turned around and was starting the sprint back to his own lines, but then Alec ran him through without a single moment of reserve or hesitation. One moment the man was alive and fleeing, and the next, he had slumped out of the saddle, the weight of his own body pulling him free of Alec's sword. The horse screamed with fright, and Alec gave it a hard swat with the flat of his bloody sword to get it out of the way.

“If you think you are taking her, you can come for her now!” Alec roared, and Marilee felt a chill run down her spine.

The desperation she had sensed under Alec's calm exterior had finally cracked him, and now it was spilling out in a torrent of rage and protective fear. He was facing down certain death; no matter how good a fighter he was, there was no way he could kill ten men. She realized how lucky they were that none of the hunting party seemed to have brought along bows; otherwise, it would have been a moot point long since.

“Start walking toward the tree line,” Alec murmured at her. “Go.”

“No.”

“Why, you little—”

“I tricked him,” Marilee shouted to the English soldiers. “I seduced him. I bewitched him just like they say I bewitched Lord

Branford. I have him bespelled, and that was why he took me.”

Alec was so startled by her words that he turned back to look at her in disbelief.

“Marilee...”

“Trenton,” shouted one of the men. “Come back and see sense. She is a Scottish witch. You need not hang with her.”

“England needs fighting men,” called another. “You will be forgiven for this!”

A stillness came across the stony field. Marilee felt a strange calm fall over her. It was over, and perhaps, despite the utterly insane things Alec had done over the last twenty-four hours, he would survive this.

“I do not want your forgiveness,” Alec snarled. “I will not have it. The only thing I want is the woman, and I will take her or I will die on this field.”

A hard hand closed over Marilee's heart, threatening to bring her to her knees. Why should Alec say he loved her when he was willing to shout this to all the world?

The biggest man from the hunting party gave him a hard look. He must have had some Northern blood in him. He was so fair she could see the gleam of his scalp through his pale hair, and his long

mustache fell down somewhere near his collar.

“You must know that you will die for this. Once again, I ask you to see sense.”

“And once again, I tell you that the woman is mine. And I may die. I know that well enough. But I also know there are those among you who will die as well. You know who I am. You know what I can do. At least some of you have seen me in battle, and I will certainly kill some of you. Likely, it will be the first ones who descend on me from the hill but maybe not.”

Alec swung his sword in an arc that flashed with the morning light, and Marilee was suddenly in awe of how strong he was, how all of that strength and all of that power was for her.

I need him to survive this. Please. I need him to live. Please, Heaven above, please let him live...

The men on the rise conferred between themselves. Alec's bravado had won them a little more time, but it was being counted out in spoons at this point. Every moment could be the last, when the hunters came thundering down on them.

“Alec, run. Please, please run.”

“I can no more run than you can,” he said, not looking back at her. “I won't. It'll be all right, Marilee. It will be all right.”

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For a single moment, Alec thought he had gone utterly mad. A battlefield had no place for such a calm and humorous voice, no place at all for such strange words. The Englishmen who had so recently been his allies looked up, startled by the newcomers, and he turned as well, staring in shock.

It was a warband of some dozen Highlanders, mounted on the short stocky ponies that kept their feet even in the most treacherous of ground. They had come through the trees where the taller English mounts could not go, and now they were behind Alec and Marilee, the same distance from them as the English.

Their leader looked too old to be Marilee's father. With his snowy beard and cragged face, he must surely have been her grandfather, but there was something as solid as the mountains about him. His words were light enough, but Alec thought that nothing at all escaped his gray-green eyes, sharp as a knife and twin to Marilee's own.

“Father?”

Marilee's voice was pure shock, and her father laughed at her. It was likely kindly meant, but Alec felt his hackles rise at anyone offering his Marilee an insult.

“Aye, lass. When you left, it was... shall we say a shock for me. I have come out to lead our host this summer in place of your poor brother.”

He cocked his head at her.

“And I know well what you came south for.”

“She killed Lord Branford in cold blood,” snarled the leader of the English hunters. “She crept into his tent at night and killed him as he was in his cups, without honor!”

Lord MacPherson threw back his head and laughed out loud. It was a terrible sound, and Alec knew in his heart that the death of his only son must have broken something in the man.

“Without honor, the English dog says! As if there was any honor in what they did to our poor Davy and what they said about him!”

He shook his head, his face growing stern and serious.

“I am too old to care about such things. I came south to lead my men, and to see if I might find my daughter, who is dear to me if more

vicious than anyone could have predicted. Now, I will take her, and that will be the end of it.”

The English soldiers snarled at that. The Scottish soldiers continued to look unimpressed, and despite himself, Alec couldn't help wincing at their sharp worn weapons. He had been fighting Highlanders for years, and he knew that they were capable of dealing out a great deal of death. If this battle were properly joined, he had no bet on who would win, but there would be a great deal of death on both sides.

The two sides eyed each other warily, and Alec felt as if the whole situation was on the verge of disaster. The English hunters were skilled warriors, and the Highlanders were no less powerful. Clan MacPherson had long stood as enemies of the South; it was one reason why Edward was so pleased to get his hands on Marilee.

The field they stood on was blocked on three sides by woods. There was no good way to make a hasty escape. He slid down off his horse, turning to Marilee, who was staring back at the Northern line as if she had seen a ghost.

“I had not thought he would ever stir from the keep again,” she murmured. “I had thought that he would die in there of grief and sorrow after Davy died.”

“Apparently he has not,” Alec said, his voice soft. “But, Marilee, we have some other problems to worry about. Let me boost you up on

the horse. We need to get away from here.”

Marilee looked a bit mutinous at being told to leave the field, but even she could see how very disastrous it would be to stay. She nodded, but when Alec reached for her, she groaned a little. Her trek toward the English had certainly taken its toll, and Alec gritted his teeth, ready to throw her across the horse's withers and flee if he had to. It might take her a while to heal, but it would be better than dying and getting no chance to heal at all.

The moment he made a move for her, however, the English hunters broke into a growl of fury.

“That girl is to be taken back to Edward,” shouted one of the men. “She is to stand trial for what she has done.”

“We don't recognize Edward as king,” returned Laird MacPherson. “I recognize him as no lord, and I certainly do not recognize him as anyone with the ability to put my daughter on trial.”

“She slew Lord Branford in cold blood!”

“Oh? And shall we talk about what Lord Branford did to my son? Shall we talk about how much English blood I might have to spill before I find that crime paid for and peace restored?”

Alec could hear in Laird MacPherson's voice the same relentless passion that dwelt in Marilee. MacPhersons were not known to pull

back. They would fight to the death if they had to, but Alec preferred to win or to fight another day.

“Alec,” Marilee said. “I fear this day might end in battle.”

“Of course, it will,” he said, and an idea came to him.

“Single combat!” he shouted, and the two sides turned to him.

“This is no French tourney,” snapped the leader of the English hunters. Alec finally recognized him as Kennic, one of the knights who rode with Lord Donal Cumberland. The man was a butcher, and not a well-regarded one. He must have been happy to get this assignment, seeing promotion and reward if he succeeded.

“And who are you to propose such a thing?” asked Lord MacPherson, who sounded more curious than anything else.

“I’m Lady Marilee MacPherson’s champion,” Alec said, and he knew that both sides were trying to figure that one out.

“You know I’m not really a lady, right?” asked Marilee.

“Of course, you are,” Alec said, his gaze roving from one side of the field to the other. If they both accepted the idea, if they both agreed that things could move forward this way, perhaps there would only need to be a single death.

“You are my daughter’s champion?” asked Laird MacPherson.

“There has been enough talk,” snapped Kennic. “All right. Single combat for the MacPherson girl. The winner takes her, the loser slinks away.”

“I am no prize,” Marilee said indignantly.

“You are for the moment, I'm afraid,” Alec said. “This may be our best chance out of this.”

Laird MacPherson gazed over the proceedings with a cold eye. Alec could see him weighing the odds. He was a man who won his battles, and his eye fell on Alec in particular.

“Agreed. Let us speak with our champion, and then we shall mark out the ground.”

Alec felt a rush of relief swell through his body. Now he knew that whatever happened to him, Marilee would be safe.

“All right,” he said. “Shall we go meet your father?”

Marilee gave him a dark look.

“What are you playing at, Alec? You need to go.”

“No. Not until you are safe.”

“I'm safe with you,” she said, and despite everything that was going on, he reached for her face and ran a gentle thumb over her

cheekbone.

“You're not,” he said quietly, leading her and his chestnut back to the Highlanders' line. “You were never safe with me, not from the first time I met you. And I am sorry for that.”

“Alec, you can't. That man's a monster.”

He grinned at her.

“So am I.”

“I would believe him, lass,” said one of the MacPherson warriors as they walked up. “I saw him at Drustan Fords, and he was a howling beast with that sword of his.”

Marilee glared at him, but before she could open her mouth to speak, her father came down off his mount and wrapped her in a deep embrace. Alec almost moved to break them apart because Marilee was wounded, but she was hanging on to the old man just as tightly.

“Father, you are yourself again,' she said, a kind of wonder in her voice. Alec didn't know what had happened to the old laird after his son died, but from the way Marilee spoke, it was dire.

“It is your fault, you know,” said the laird gruffly. “You left on your mad mission and it shamed me, lass, it shamed me full sore. How could I count myself a man, let alone the Laird of Clan MacPherson, if I had let you off to take revenge for all our name?”

“You came south to find me?”

He snorted.

“I came south to make war, my lass. I knew that with my blood and the blood of your mother in you that you would bring terror down on them. When I heard you were here, well, I thought that I might see if you could use a hand, but I knew you would be all right.”

Alec stared at this strange exchange, and some of his temper sparked.

“You let a young girl go wandering south to... to commit murder for you?” he exploded. “Do you have any idea what might have happened to her, any idea what *did* happen to her?”

Laird MacPherson turned to him, not letting go of his daughter.

“Well, I see she has acquired an English knight. That's hardly the way I raised her.”

Alec started to growl in response, but then to his surprise, Marilee laughed.

“You're both right,” she said, a kind of pleasure in her voice he had not heard before. This was her when she was at home with her people, and that sent a soft pang through him that he certainly could not afford right now.

Laird MacPherson looked at him with a shrewd eye.

“And shall I let you fight for my daughter? Is that an honor that you deserve?”

Alec scowled, but Marilee spoke up, drawing herself up tall even as he could see that it pained her slightly to do so.

“I say that he may fight for me, Father. He is mine, and he is the match for any of our men.”

A stirring of interest moved through the ranks, and Alec stood up a little straighter as well, ignoring the eyes that were now looking him over. Other men might have remarked on the wolfish nature of the Northern clans, their constant testing and evaluation of the strength of others, but he had also fought in the army for years. It was nothing new, and at the end of the day, Marilee was right. He was a match for anyone, and doubly so if Marilee was in danger.

Laird MacPherson gave him another dark look.

“See that you prove yourself worthy of it, Sir Knight. Marilee belongs only to herself, but that does not mean that she is without allies and without people who will protect her and care for her.”

Alec bit back the urge to ask where those allies and protectors had been when she was imprisoned by the English.

Marilee could tell he was thinking it, however, because she took

his hand.

"I have faith in him, Father," she said, and Alec's heart warmed.

Laird MacPherson sighed.

“All right. Then let's see where this madness will take us.”

[illegible]

CHAPTER 44

[illegible]

Marilee knew she should feel out of place on the field. She was the only woman there. She was, as far as most of those gathered were concerned, the prize being fought for.

Right now, however, she had no time and no patience at all for anything but Alec, who was watching grimly as the ground was laid out and taking a few swings with his sword.

"Please," she said. "Be careful. Please come back alive."

There was an almost audible click as he turned back to her. In a single moment, his cold preparation for the battle was replaced with a fierce stare that was totally focused on her.

“Stay close to your family,” he growled. “Do not get any closer to the English than you need to.”

“Do you think I care about that right now?” she demanded hotly.

He glared at her, taking her shoulders in his hands.

“We are not fighting about any of this right now. I do not go into any battle intending to die, but I will say that it is a possibility. If I die —”

“Alec!”

“If I die, I want to do it knowing that at the very least, I put you where your people could protect you. Just... Please. I am begging you.”

“You don't beg for anything.”

“I'd beg for this. Do you want me to go down on my knees to you? I will.”

Marilee flinched because she could hear the raw truth of it in his voice.

“All right. I will stay close to my family.”

Alec softened a little.

“Good. That is all I can ask you.”

“And all I want is for you to stay alive.”

He gave her a slight smile, and Marilee's heart felt as if it was too large for her chest. Heaven above, how was she meant to bear it? She had only been with him such a short while, and now she could hardly

imagine what her life might be like without him.

It would be cold. So cold and barren.

“Marilee?”

“What?”

“Tell me you love me again.”

She glared up at him with a challenging look on her face.

“You wouldn't give it to me before, and so I am not giving it to you now,” she said defiantly. “If you want to hear it so very much, then come back for it.”

Alec stared at her, and she had just a moment to be shocked at her own cruelty when his face lit up. The grin on his face made her heart beat faster, and he took her hand, pulling her close to him.

“Oh, you beauty. You're going to keep me lively right up until I fall into my grave, aren't you?”

“If I ever let you rest in it at all,” she retorted. “Go. Win. Return to me. I won't have it any other way.”

Alec's grin grew as fierce as a wolf's snarl, and he stepped back, raising his sword in a brief salute as he was called to the fighting ground.

It wasn't much. It was only a large square marked out with four men, two English, two Scottish at the corners. The combat rules were ancient: two bloody wounds out of three would prove the winner. It was not to the death, but Marilee guessed that every man present knew how fatal any conflict with weapons and will could be.

"You did well," her father said at her side.

"Did I?"

"You never send a man off to a fight with wailing and an embrace. That was how your mother used to send me off to war, as well."

"I would rather keep him from it," she said a little tartly.

He laughed.

"You might do it. That one won't fight for his king any longer, will he?"

She stiffened.

"He's no coward."

"Oh, lass. Look at the size of that Englishman they have brought to fight him. He's no coward. It is only that he cares for you more than he cares for any oaths he took."

Marilee winced because her father was right. The man who had been put up as the English champion was enormous, the mustached man she had noted earlier. There was no mercy in his eyes, nothing but blood and ambition in his grin, and she composed herself against the panic beginning to edge into her body.

Her father was also right in that she had, in a strange way, ruined Alec. He wouldn't fight for Edward any longer, and what he had done would make him a wanted man throughout the South.

We will have to hope that I am worth what he has left behind...

Bare-chested and bearing only their swords, Alec and the English champion watched each other from opposite sides of the fields. Marilee willed herself to calm, because she was no weeping maiden. This was the truth of life on the border. This was the price for loving Alec Trenton, and by Heaven and all the saints who dwelt therein, she would pay it and pay it with joy.

Fight. Win. Come back to me. It was all that mattered any longer.

The shout went up from the man hard by the field, everyone present tensed, and then Alec and the English champion were rushing at each other, war cries ringing from their throats and their swords raised high.

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CHAPTER 45

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Alec had never fought Kennic before, but he knew the man by reputation. Kennic hit hard, but he was as slow as a torpid bull. The man was not particularly enamored of a fair fight, but he had kept his honor long enough that it likely wasn't something to worry about. Kennic liked to win.

What a coincidence, Alec thought as their blades crashed for the first time. *So do I.*

With the first blow, Alec knew there was a limited number of times he could go head to head against the other knight. Kennic had too much weight over him, so that meant that if he hit, Alec simply had to be elsewhere.

Be faster than he is. All you have to be is faster than he is...

Alec let Kennic get a few more swings in, large chopping things that might have ended the match entirely if they had landed, but of course, they didn't. The bigger man was slowing down already, and

Alec kept him turning again and again, trying to hit a man who wasn't there.

When he turned especially slowly, Alec brought his sword up for a quick cut, a sharp slice across the ribs. It would hurt like the very devil, but it would not kill the man, but Kennic roared like a struck bull, cursing and turning toward Alec with murder in his eyes.

Oh, he's not going to stop at wounds, Alec realized, and whether it was due to the man's ambition or his bloodlust, it mattered not at all. Then Alec had no more time for thinking because Kennic came after him, pushing him hard enough that Alec came hard upon the border of the fighting ground. Getting driven out beyond the border counted as a blow, and Alec had to move more quickly to dance around it.

As he went past, he caught a glimpse of Marilee's face, pale and with those great eyes that could see to the very heart of him. It made him hesitate, and then he roared with pain and rage as Kennic somehow turned his sword around in a quick slash that cut across his thigh. The pain burned, and the shock of it nearly made his leg fold underneath him, but then he recovered, staggering away and almost behind Kennic as he recovered.

That could have been very, very bad. It had changed the weight of the fight. He had one more chance to bring Kennic down, or he would lose, and after that, it didn't even matter. He had no ability to lose this fight, no matter what it cost him. He couldn't.

Kennic had picked up a second wind, however, and the man harried him to the edges of the field and back. Alec was slower now than he had been before, and while the wound on his thigh hadn't cut deep enough to lame him, it had slowed him down.

I need to end this sooner rather than later. No more waiting for him to tire out. No more looking for an opening. I suppose I have to make one.

Alec got his good foot below him, and with a strangled cry, he launched himself at Kennic, sword lashing out. It was completely opposed to how he had been fighting before, and he heard shouts going up on either side of the field, Highlanders and Englishmen alike. He rang a hard flurry of blows down on Kennic's head, and the man fell back in surprise, swearing as he had to give way.

If Alec had had a shield, he would have bashed the man to the ground, but shields were ruled out for this combat. Instead, he battered at him without relenting, knowing that he would pay for this in pain later on, if there was a later on.

He knew that the blows wouldn't land, that Kennic was too skilled for that, but he wanted to frustrate and infuriate the man, driving him to carelessness and fury.

Finally, he saw Kennic go momentarily blind with rage, and the man lifted his sword too high. Alec expended the last of his energy on cutting the man's leg before stumbling back. Two out of three, and he was the victor.

Kennic's sword blow fell harmlessly to the ground, and Alec pulled back farther. He felt like his chest had been replaced with a blacksmith's bellows. His sides went in and out, and he was nearly blinded by sweat and exhaustion.

“That's it,” he gasped. “I've won.”

The clearing filled with words, men jabbering and quarreling, a few paying off gambling debts, and then Marilee was across the field and in his arms.

“You great fool,” she murmured. “You are a terrible fool.”

“But you love me,” he said, a wide foolish grin across his face.

“Always,” she said, and she would have said more if Kennic had not roared again, stung by his loss.

He lunged for Alec, who only had time to push Marilee out of the way before jumping back. His sword had fallen out of his hand, and now he was unarmed with a man apparently intent on murder lurching toward him.

The cry went up, people were coming, English and Scottish alike because honor had been satisfied, but Alec was too exhausted to dodge the English knight for very long. He saw the man raise his sword, and then Kennic roared with surprise and stumbled forward.

Alec stared with horror when he saw it was Marilee who must

have leaped at the fighter, landing with all her weight on the man's back as her sharp nails clawed at his face from behind. Kennic howled with panic, and that was enough for the English hunters to overwhelm him, pulling him back even as Alec went to scoop Marilee up in his arms.

“That was terrible,” he said, his voice rising. “Why in the name of *Heaven*...?”

“He was going to kill you!” Marilee shouted right back. “He was going to kill you, and I would not stand for that. You are mine, do you hear me, Alec Trenton? You are mine, and I will not suffer you to be taken away from me by such a low coward's trick!”

Alec stared down at her, at the protective rage in her small face, the pure willingness she had to lay down her life for him. It left him feeling strangely small and humble, as if he had met something far greater than he ever deserved, and in response, all he could do was pull her into his arms, pressing a deep kiss to her mouth.

She was stiff for a moment, still keyed up from rushing an English knight several times her size, he guessed, but then she threw her arms around him, kissing him back just as fiercely.

In that moment, there was nothing besides the two of them, nothing at all except the desire he had for her. It wasn't a desire of the body, or at least, it was not *only* a desire of the body. It was a need that went straight through him. He would need her every day of his

life, her heart, her spirit, her very soul. They fit together like nothing he had ever felt, and now that he'd found her, there was no way in the world that he would let her go.

Finally, Marilee was the one who had to pull back, and it was only because her father had come up to them. The English knights, dragging Kennic away bodily as he staggered on his feet, were departing, and Alec dared think that they were actually safe.

"Well, that was a neat bit of fighting you have done, Englishman," the older man said.

"Thank you, Laird MacPherson," Alec said. "Hopefully, it has won you some esteem."

"And why would you want my esteem, then?"

Marilee stiffened, and he realized she had every intention of shouting at her own father to defend his honor, such as it was. Gently and with great care, he put a hand over her mouth, making her yelp with offended dignity.

"I want your esteem, Laird MacPherson, because I wish to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

He had hoped for an awed acceptance; he was braced for a furious denial. He had not expected a hard laugh.

"We're not Lowlanders with frail women who must be told what

is what. If you do not know that my daughter will do as she likes, then you are a poor match for her. Also, if you do not remove your hand from her mouth, I believe you will find that she bites.”

Alec took his hand from Marilee's mouth to find her eyes bright and snapping like the very heart of a hot bonfire. His heart ached for how bruised and tired she was, and at the same time, it beat only in admiration of who she was, what she would do for the ones she loved. She would frustrate him beyond all measure, she would be brave and reckless, and he would never have her change a moment of it.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well, I think you had better do better than that,” she retorted.

He grinned.

“All right. Marilee MacPherson, will you have me, yes or no, for your husband? I will spend all my days with you, defending you, supporting you, giving you everything it is in my power to give you until the sun falls into the sea.”

She lifted her chin, a challenging look in her eyes.

“If you want me at all, you must say it. I have said it often enough, and I will move no further without it.”

Alex laughed, and he felt lighter than he ever had. A feeling of pure joy buoyed him up so high he was certain he could touch the

very face of the Heaven, but all he wanted was to be on the earth and of the earth with Marilee.

“I love you,” he said tenderly. “Give me leave, beautiful Marilee, and I will love you all my days and after them if I can.”

She threw herself into his arms, and he read her answer in her embrace, her kiss, and the bright tears that flowed down her face.

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CHAPTER 46

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The day dawned bright and clear, so bright that it made Marilee's heart ache. When she looked out the window toward Mount Uaine, she knew that she had come home. Her long and fraught travel in the South had taught her a great deal about what home was, and she knew that it was nowhere else.

Still in her shift, she paused at the window, looking out over the forest and the mountain before her. A cool breeze made her break into goosebumps, but still, she gazed out over the countryside, MacPherson lands.

A year ago, I could not stand this place because it had too many memories of my mother and my brother. Can I stand it better now?

She still wasn't sure. She had come home, and she had brought Alec home with her, but she wondered if there was still some kind of unease around her in this keep, as if the stones had become so soaked with her earlier grief and sorrow that they were strange to her now.

This is not the kind of day to be thinking about sorrow at all, she told herself sternly. Put it out of your mind, because today is about the future.

She went to the chest by her bed, and she reached for the blue linen dress that had been folded up neatly inside it. As she shook it out, scraps of lavender and rue fell to the floor, giving the dress a soft sweet scent that made her smile. Lavender was one of her mother's favorite flowers. She knew that the dead were never so very far away, and sometimes, she was all right with that.

The dress was made from fabric she had woven herself, dyed with woad that was picked by women of the clan. Her sewing skills had never been amazing, but she had still sat with it night after night, swearing softly every time she stabbed herself in the fingers as she stitched the long straight seams. Some of the other women had taken pity on her and helped her handle the tricky curves around the bodice and the fiddly stitching necessary for the lacing holes, but all in all, it was her endeavor.

It was a lovely dress, with small white flowers embroidered at her shoulders and her waist, but she knew that it was a homely thing compared to the dresses that Alec had provided her with before. She could still remember how beautiful they were, and how silly as well, for never being able to be put on without someone else.

This dress, well, it felt more like her. It felt more like them.

She held it up to her body, slightly fanciful and amused at herself, and then the tapestry that hung over her doorway was thrown open. She yelped with offense, stuffing the dress back into the open chest, and turned to see Alec crossing the floor toward her.

Before she could scold him for coming into her room without so much as invitation, he swept her up in his arms, hugging her close and nuzzling his face against her throat.

“What a beautiful, beautiful bride!” he exclaimed.

Marilee pushed him away.

“Oh, Heaven protect us, are you *drunk*?”

“If I am, it is your father's and kinsmen's fault,” he said. “They said there was a tradition. He had to take bridegrooms out to the wilderness and make them find their way back.”

“That's not a tradition,” Marilee began, but Alec was still talking.

“But it wasn't sporting if I was in my own mind. They said.. they said I had to drink, so I made them drink as well, because I was not going to be the only sober man in a forest after moonrise.”

“So my father and my uncles were then drunk in the forest. Did they make it back with you?”

Alec shrugged expansively.

“I have no idea. I either got separated from them, or they left me behind in hopes that the wolves of the mountain would help them get over the possibility of having an Englishman in the family.”

Marilee glared, taking Alec's hand and leading him out of her room and toward the kitchen.

“If they are not over that by now, the mountain can have them,” she retorted.

In the kitchen, she cracked a raw egg into a dish, added a dash of pepper, and handed it all to Alec.

“Here. Get that down you.”

“Why?”

“Because I won't have you drunk while you're marrying me. I don't want you to doubt your wits in the years to come and tell me you were drunk when we wed.”

“I will never doubt this decision,” Alec said, and his smile was so adoring that she almost believed him.

“Drink it,” she said with a sigh. “I'd rather not have you hungover either if it could be helped. You can bet that I will be giving the same to my father and my relatives if they make it back. Come on.”

Alec made a face and drank down the raw egg with one gulp. He made a face, looked slightly green around the gills for a moment, but then he nodded.

“I wish that didn't work as well as it did. It's disgusting.”

“I'm glad it worked,” she retorted. “And I'm glad you made it down the mountain after a night of hard drinking with Clan MacPherson.”

Alec grinned at her gamely, but she could feel a small tickle at the back of her mind. Would this be the rest of his life with her family? Would he always have to prove himself, over and over again to no avail?

“What would you think about living deeper in the mountains?”

He took her hand, giving her a careful look.

“Why would we live deeper in the mountains?”

“There are some crofts out there. They're empty after their owners never came back from the fighting. They are on MacPherson land, and of course, we would come back here for supplies, holidays, things like that. But... would you rather be out there?”

Alec shrugged.

“Where would you rather be?”

EPILOGUE

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Two years later

Summer had come again, and with it, the battle season. The fighting had grown more intense again, and Alec knew that it would not be an easy season or a quiet one.

The men gathered in the courtyard of the MacPherson keep nodded to him gravely as he went to check his chestnut's girth and gear. Things had gotten easier since he and Marilee had moved to one of the distant crofts. They could get used to having an Englishman in their midst more slowly, and over time, he could see how he would become one of them, leaving aside his past like he would put away a suit of clothes that no longer fit him.

Marilee was right. They do like me better if they have some space to get used to me. That's no terrible thing. If they let me stay, there will always be progress to be made. And of course, now they know that she will fight for me as well, whether it is good for her or not.

He thought that his presence in his second battle season with the MacPherson warband would help as well. He realized with some ruefulness that he was just as good at killing English knights as he was at killing Highlanders, and the more time he spent in the North, the more he realized why they fought. The English were the invaders, and the Highlanders were only trying to defend their homes.

Of course, all it took to have the old Laird accept me was getting his daughter pregnant.

He couldn't think about his son Owain too much today. It would only make leaving him and his wife harder, and it was hard enough as it was. Owain was less than a year old, and Alec had never felt anything like what he felt for the little boy.

“Alec! Alec, here, let me put the mare next to yours...”

He turned in surprise and scowled when he saw Marilee in rough traveling clothes, leading her mare, which was loaded down with provisions and gear. In the coldest nights of the year, some hints of her beating remained in bad dreams and a certain kind of stiffness, but most of the time, she looked so healthy and happy that it broke his heart in a way he couldn't quite explain.

“And what in the world do you think you are doing?” he asked.
“Where's Owain?”

“Well, Owain is currently in the keeping of Anna Brown. You

know her. She's the woman who does that excellent chicken. She said that she would care for Owain until we returned."

"Marilee..."

"You needn't look down on Anna," Marilee said with mock offense. "She had the raising of me as much as my own mother does, and she delights in it. I did promise her a sheepskin from our flock this fall, of course. It's important to show her that we are grateful. Do thank her when you see her next, won't you?"

Alec growled.

"Marilee, you can't just leave our son."

"You are."

The words hit Alec square on the chest, threatening to knock the very wind out of him.

"You know that I wouldn't if I didn't have to."

Marilee's eyes softened. He had never quite figured out if they were gray or green or what they most resembled. In the end, he realized her eyes reminded him of the springtime itself, when all the world was awakening from winter and life was returning to the mountain.

"Of course. And if I go with you, I can make sure that you stay a

little safer, that you are a little more comforted on the road. I know how dangerous the battle road is, Alec. I'm not some weak little thing who will cry at the sight of blood."

"I never thought you were. I don't want you close to that violence. I don't want you to see it or to suffer it."

"And I don't want you to go through it either. Alec. You are my husband. You are the other half of my heart. When you left last year —"

"You were pregnant with Owain, there was no way—"

"I know! I know, and yet I thought it would kill me, watching down the road for you to return or... or to get word that you never would."

Alec paused, and Marilee reached up to touch his face. Sometimes it was difficult to remember how very small she was. She barely came up to his shoulder; so often, it felt as if she simply bluffed the world into thinking she was bigger than she truly was.

"Alec... do not ask me to do that again. It was terrible. And if I come with you, no matter what comes, no matter what happens, we will be together."

"Owain..."

"Owain will be happy to have both of us back rather than one of

us mourning forever. He is in good hands. Who knows, if we do a good enough job, maybe he can have a life without all of this fighting.”

Alec sighed.

“It seems too difficult a dream sometimes, doesn't it?”

Marilee leaned into him, pressing her forehead against his shoulder. He knew in that moment that if he forbade her from going, she would return to theircroft with their son. He knew that she loved him, and if he said that he couldn't have her so close to all the killing then she would relent. Marilee would bow to him in this matter. She would do it not because she believed he was right but because she loved him.

“Alec, please,” she said softly.

Defeated, he nodded.

“All right, let me check your gear, and then we should go say goodbye to Owain, as he won't be seeing either of us for a few months. Are you sure about this?”

She looked up at him, a bright gleam in her eyes. Heaven and all its saints, but she could break his heart with just a smile.

“Being with you? Yes. I have never been more sure about anything in my life.”

He couldn't resist. He leaned down to kiss her, and when he did so, it reminded him of a world that was, after all, worth fighting for.

“You're mine,” he murmured. “I love you. I'll say it every night if you want me to.”

“I will hold you to that,” Marilee laughed. “And I love you. And we will keep each other safe and come home.”

Alec knew that there were no guarantees in war. The path that brought them back to the keep and to Mount Uaine could be a treacherous one, and not all the love in the world could keep them safe if fate had other plans in mind.

He also knew, however, that in this moment, he was with Marilee, the sun was shining, and nothing would ever change that fact. Nothing in all the world.

Elsewhere

October 1306

The rain was coming down in buckets, and everyone on the street hurried along, eager to be home and out of the deluge. It was a cold fall rain, the kind that predicted a terribly cold winter, and Madlan shrugged deeper into her cloak. It was a patchy thing, more holes than wool, but it was better than nothing.

I should have kept back some of the funds from that last take. Could

have used it to buy some better clothes.

She knew that she wouldn't have done it though. She probably wouldn't even do it with all the money from this particular night's venture. Every coin that wasn't meant to feed her or to get her to the next town was sent straight to London as soon as she could make it happen. That money was for better than her, she knew, and sometimes, it was only the thought of what it went for that kept her moving forward, that kept her from simply lying down in the muck and never getting up again.

After all, it isn't as if I haven't been down in the muck plenty enough as it is.

Over the past few years, Madlan had done things she had never thought she could before. She had stolen from wicked people, and she had stolen from good people. She had given up almost every pretty fantasy that she had about the world she lived in. She had come perilously close to being killed, either out of revenge for some petty theft or by authorities greater than she cared to think about.

However, s

he had also never gotten caught. She was still free, and if she was quick, and if she was clever, and if above all she never lost her nerve, her father would be freed as well.

She shook her head. The cold was seeping into her bones,

leaving her more prone to woolgathering. Madlan rubbed her hands up and down her arms to keep herself warm as she waited for the street to empty.

From her protected spot between two empty vendor stalls, she could see into the stable yards of the inn. She had seen the two English knights come in earlier, and she had seen their horses as well. They were good horses, built for battle, and this close to the coast, there would be plenty of buyers among the northern raiders. She could have the money in hand in a few days, and that would be another payment to her father's gaolers.

It stung a little, thinking like this. This wasn't the way an English lady was meant to act. She might have been a lady without a penny, and she might have given up every protection that came with her noble birth, but it didn't change where she had come from.

Sometimes, she hated the young girl she had been, the one who had thought that life would always be as soft and as sweet as it was.

Madlan put the thought out of her head.

The hostler had left his post and made his way down the alley beyond. She knew he was going to see the young widow who lived down the lane. It was a secret he had carefully kept, but he had not been able to keep it from her, not as she had lurked in the darkness.

All right. I only have so much time, let's see...

The stables were warm with the insulation from the hay and the horses inside. By the flickering torchlight, she saw a tall black gelding with a white blaze down its nose, It was closest to the door, and she smiled as it lifted its head and flicked its ears toward her.

“All right, I guess, you're coming with me...”

There was no time to more than bridle the gelding, but she had ridden bareback before. In a few moments, she led the horse out into the yard, and then she was away in the rain, not to be caught.

At least, that was the way it should have gone. Instead, just as she mounted the gelding, a man came out of the darkness, a shouting trio on his heels.

“Well, this looks like my ride.”

The voice... did something to her. It sent a chill down her spine and made her heart beat faster. That voice struck her with the force of a blow, and she dug her heels into the gelding, desperate to be away.

Instead of making her escape, however, the man from the darkness vaulted onto the horse's back behind her, and strong hands wrested the reins from hers.

“What in the name of all that is holy are you doing?” Madlan demanded, her voice hoarse with the cold.

“Getting away,” came the response, and just as she could feel the

PREVIEW OF NEXT BOOK

Thank You

for reading my book.

A Highlander's Honor is Book 10 in the series.

The next book is targeted to release on **25th Nov.**

While waiting...

If you have enjoyed reading it, I believe you will enjoy reading the previous book.

[illegible]

Here is the sneak preview of the previous book

See below ...

PROLOGUE

Order of Laurens off the Firth of Clyde

March 1306

It had warmed up a little bit over the last two weeks, just enough for Eleanor to believe that the iron grip of winter was broken. She realized now, though, an hour before dawn, on the high and windy stone path to the north of the cloister, that the winter had only gone still for a moment. It was no longer rampaging over the stony western borderlands, but it had not pulled back into a full retreat either. Instead, it felt as if the sodden winter winds were merely waiting, trying to figure out if they would retreat farther north or if they would descend on the land again.

Please stay away. Please. No more storms, no more blizzards.

By her side, Remy whoofed gently, shoving an icy cold nose in her hand. He wasn't meant to be so affectionate while he was in harness, but she relented a little, ruffling his long furry ears.

“Come on, love,” she murmured. “You can bear him a little farther, can't you?”

“Pray he does,” wheezed Sister Anna by her side. “He's a big enough lout that we'd have to drag him on his face if your dog decided he wasn't interested in helping anymore.”

He was a man who looked close to death, wrapped up in a dark cloak that might still end up serving as a shroud instead of something to protect him. Just an hour ago, he had been dumped on the cloister's doorstep, wounded and unconscious, and as a man, he could not be allowed within the gates where the chaste sisters and postulantes, like Eleanor, lived.

Instead, Sister Anna, one of the Laurens skilled in healing, was going to tend to him in an empty cottage on the shore, and Eleanor... Eleanor was going to help.

She still didn't know what had possessed her to volunteer for the duty. She guessed that most of the cloister still thought that she was a simpleton. She had been at the cloister for almost a year, and for the first four months of that period, she had barely spoken, barely done more than look up, whether she was at prayers or doing the hard work that made life on the isolated cloister possible.

Still, she had risen from her bed to follow kind Sister Anna on her nighttime summons, and then seeing the man so helpless... It had done something to her.

Eleanor pushed the thought away, the strange tremor that had gone through her. It was foolish, no matter what it was, and now she was committed to the work of trying to keep this mysterious man alive.

The sledge that bore the man staggered a little, running over a rut hidden in the darkness, and Eleanor went down on her knees to try to keep it steady. For just a moment in the gray dawn light, she saw the man's eyes flicker open. His face was all bloodied, but his eyes were momentarily clear, and for a second, Eleanor would swear that he looked at her, saw her.

Help me, he seemed to say. *Help me, please.*

Oh, I will, she thought, from somewhere in her heart. *I must.*

Then they were bumping along again down to the cottage by the edge of the water, and even though Eleanor knew that there was still much work to be done, she felt a surge of relief. Together, she and Sister Anna transferred the man to the musty bed and then the older nun turned to her.

“Build up that fire as best you can. I'm going after water. If he wakes, try to keep him quiet. The worst thing he can do now is tear

his wounds open.”

Eleanor nodded, setting about her work even if her hands shook. She still didn't like the dark, even if she no longer had screaming nightmares as soon as the candles were put out, but she managed. Soon enough, a brisk fire burned in the hearth, and Sister Anna was back with two buckets of water. Together, they stripped the man to the skin, and Eleanor made a face at what rags his clothes had become, sodden with blood and mud, parts still damp while others had dried. Still, she laid them aside because clothes were dear, and a wash might make them presentable again. Inside the fabric that they had wrapped him in, she and Anna also found a bag, similarly splattered, and a sword as well, a short one meant for stabbing and carried by soldiers on both sides of the English-Scottish fighting. These Eleanor handled gingerly and set aside, the bag on a hook by the door, and the sword under the bed. He could decide himself what to do with them if he lived.

She thought that Sister Anna would send her away when it was time to wash the man, but the sister only shook her head.

“There's no time for modesty or prudishness when lives are on the line, my girl,” she said, directing Eleanor in cleaning the shallow graze on the man's bare arm. “The cloister might prefer that we never looked upon unclothed bodies, but we are in the business of saving lives here.”

The normally prim sister's blunt assessment of the situation made Eleanor laugh in surprise.

The nun shot her a quick grin.

“I wasn't always a nun,” she said with a wink. “I followed the banner myself once upon a time, with a fine Irishman for a bed mate. Then he died, and I was still all alive-o, and here I am, trying to keep this poor lout among the breathing.”

It was surprisingly tiring work, cleaning the man and bandaging him. He was large and heavy, and by the end, Eleanor was shaking a little from stress and weariness. The wounds had been hard to look at, and more than once, she'd had to still herself, take deep breaths and then proceed.

Still, she made it all the way to the end, and as they washed their hands in the bucket, Sister Anna nodded.

“That's well done of you, little girl,” she said. “He has a better chance now.”

“Do... do you think he will live?” she asked hesitantly. She thought Sister Anna would say something about it being in the hands of great Heaven, but the other woman only shrugged.

“Well, he has lost a great deal of blood, but the wounds do not seem mortal. Someone was trying to kill him, though, and if he made

it through like this, he has the devil's own luck, to be sure. However, the cuts are clean, and we have cleansed and staunched them well. If he is lucky, if we are dedicated and keep him warm, he may well live.”

The idea of warmth made Eleanor sit up.

“Wait, I have an idea...”

She called softly for Remy, who was enjoying a rest by the fire. At her call, however, the large dog lumbered up and then allowed himself to be directed to rest alongside the unconscious man on the side closest to the wall.

“That wall is so cold,” Eleanor said. “This will help, surely. Remy is as good as three or four blankets.”

“So long as he does not pounce on the man or try to break his wounds open.”

“He's in more danger of being licked to death,” Eleanor said with a slight smile. She was a little startled when it felt strange on her mouth. When was the last time she had smiled at all?

There were a pair of chairs in the small cottage, the only furniture besides the bed and a tiny table made from rough-hewn board. The entire place was rough with a hard wind that whipped through as if the walls were nothing but leaves, but Eleanor and Sister

Anna were both pleased to settle in the chairs by the fire, resting as best they could.

“Now, we'll see. If the fever doesn't take him, and the wounds don't go bad. Well. He might have a chance.”

“Who is he, do you think?” Eleanor asked.

Sister Anna shook her head.

“This year? On the border? It is best not to ask.”

The fighting between England and Scotland had heated up again last summer. After the brief truce a few years ago, the fighting was more intense than ever, and those on the border, the ones who might be Scottish or might be English seemed to bear the brunt of it. The Order of Laurens was mostly spared the worst, but every woman there knew that the war was a fickle thing and that for every time it might have spared them, it might have destroyed them as well.

They sat in silence for a while, both dozing at different times. Every time that Eleanor stood to check on their patient, he stirred a little. He felt hot under her hand, but there was no unnatural heat to him, nothing that made her nervous.

Heal. She wondered why it was so important to her.

At dawn, a twelve-year-old postulate came down with a basket full of food and a message for Sister Anna.

“The Mother Superior wants you to return,” she said. “Two sisters have started coughing in the night, and she needs you to see if it is the plague or not.”

Sister Anna looked up in consternation.

“We cannot leave this man alone,” she said, even as she stood reluctantly. “We cannot leave him to die after all the effort of helping him. It would be wrong.”

The postulate glanced at Eleanor.

“The Mother Superior says that Eleanor might stay if she is capable.”

Eleanor sat up straight.

“Of course, I can,” she said with a confidence that she did not necessarily feel.

Sister Anna nodded.

“I’ll remind the kitchen to send you food. If he has a fever, cool him. If the wounds start to stink, dig the bad flesh out if you can, but be ready to call for a grave to be dug as well. If he turns out to be vile, leave him and return. Do you understand?”

Eleanor wanted to laugh at Sister Anna’s words, but she knew they were in earnest. A soldiering life was a difficult one, but it had

obviously given her wisdom that Eleanor was happy to follow.

“Yes, I’ll remember.”

Another moment and the sister and postulate were gone, leaving her alone with the unconscious man and the rising dawn. The basket bore some meager supplies; rations at the order were skimpy on good days, but she thought she might be able to supplement them with mussels and oysters gathered from the shore if she had to.

I am being quite calm, she thought with some surprise. So often in the past year, her thoughts had been shadowed with nightmares, dark things that left her choking and unable to do anything but tremor. Now, though, it was as if a knife had cut through that haze.

Is it because I have found someone who needs help?

At some point, she must have dozed in the chair, as miserably uncomfortable as it was. She dreamed, but it wasn't a dream about her old house or the orchard behind it. Instead, her dreams were like a dark pillow she could press her face into, black and warm and almost comforting.

When Eleanor opened her eyes, she realized two things. The first was that she had slept long enough for the meager winter sun to rise, sending soft light around the edges of the cottage's only window shutter.

The second was that the wounded man was watching her, his head turned, and his eyes open.

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CHAPTER 01

Lachlan MacTyr had woken in pain before. Of course, he had. Pain was a soldier's wage as much as gold and ale were, pain that was sharp and blinding, pain that throbbed and lingered years after the wound was taken. He was almost thirty, and under Robert's banner and in his own career as a raider, he had taken plenty of wounds.

The first thing he thought upon waking this time, however, was that he hoped he had killed the man who had put him in such a sorry state.

His body felt as if a warhorse had dropped on it, an unending throbbing ache, and all over, he felt the cuts and slashes that were so often the wages of battle. His head ached, his mouth tasted foul, and there was something particularly wrong with his right arm, his sword arm, which he grimly thought was going to be the worst of it.

A moment later, however, Lachlan also realized that he was warm, pleasantly so, and dry, which was a special kind of heaven after the damp of the winter. When he glanced at the warm body next to him, Lachlan was bemused to see the round sleepy face of an enormous black and white dog, big enough for a little child to ride.

The dog looked up at him with a total lack of interest, yawned to show off impressive teeth and a scarlet tongue, and then fell back asleep.

I am not dead, and it seems as if no one wants me dead right this moment if the warm bed is any indication. I might as well go back to sleep.

Before he could so, however, he heard a whimper to his left, and when he turned his head, he saw a strange sight.

By the coals of a dying fire was a young woman sleeping in a chair, her head tilted back against the top rung, her arms crossed over her meager chest and her legs curled underneath her. At some point in the night, her white head-covering had fallen back, revealing hair he thought might be a medium brown, and allowing him to see her face, which was delicate, oval, and oddly lovely in a kind of elfin way. She wore the plain loose gray dress of a holy woman, and some pieces fell together.

Well, most won't care to harm someone in the company of a holy woman. But he knew how little that might mean in wartime.

Lachlan was weary to his bones, but for some reason, instead of going to sleep, he found himself watching her, taking in the delicate lines of her face, and the occasional twitch of her long fingers where they rested against her arm. She was younger than he had thought at first, something soft and sweet about her mouth and eyes.

Not a nun, but a young novice, perhaps. Wonder why such a pretty thing would take vows...

Lachlan knew well, however, that the world was a dark enough place that there were many reasons why a woman might seek the shelter of stone walls and the company of other women alone.

As he watched, eyes half-lidded, she stirred a little. A line appeared between her dark brows, as if she were struggling with something in her dreams, and then her eyes opened, wide and wondering.

For a moment, they only stared at each other, and Lachlan felt something change inside him. He was not a spiritual man or even a particularly superstitious one. He did not believe in things he could not see, and love was something for fools and poets.

However.

He met the eyes of the delicate girl with the oval face, and something in him tore, something in him opened, and somewhere deep in a place that he didn't understand, Lachlan knew that nothing would ever be the same.

“Well, good morning,” he said, his voice as rusty as an old latch.

“Good... good morning,” she murmured. Her voice was deeper than he would have thought, though light.

She sat up quickly, her white head-covering tipping back entirely to let her long braid slide out over her shoulder. She looked like a little fawn, startled from her resting place.

“How long have you been awake?” she asked.

Lachlan started to shrug, but the thrum of pain that went through his arm told him why that was a bad idea.

“Not long. Where am I?”

“In a cottage on the shores of the Firth of Clyde,” she said quietly. “Very close to the Order of the Laurens. I’m sorry, we could not have you within the gates.”

Lachlan nodded, his mind spinning. The night before was a mass of swords, a cluster of curses and fury.

“No matter,” he said, and he tried to rise.

The pain that spiked through his body made him groan, and he ended up flat on his back again, a light sweat breaking out as the girl sprang to her feet.

“Oh, don’t do that,” she said. “You’re hurt. Please, if you move, you’ll only tear your wounds open.”

Lachlan was in an impressive amount of pain, but something about her words made him gasp out a laugh.

“You needn't sound so panicked, lass. After that little performance, I'm not going to try that again any time soon.”

He looked up at her, curious about the panic and worry in her face. She looked genuinely concerned for him, almost fearful that he would do something tremendously stupid and try to rise again.

“Are you so very good then?” He decided to excuse the silly question because of the pain that clouded his thoughts.

She looked startled.

“Good? Me?”

“Aye. You seem distraught. I'm no kin of yours, am I, lass, for you to be so concerned?”

“You're a person,” she said as if she had never considered it. “You appeared in need of aid. We are bound to give it if we can.”

She hesitated for a moment.

“I... I should check your bandages. Especially after you tried to stand up like that. I'm not supposed to let you move much, and you might have broken some of the wounds open again.”

Still, she didn't move, and Lachlan felt a strange surge of pity for her, in a heart that plenty of men would say was made of only stone.

“Lass, I'm in no condition to bite you.”

“Would you bite me if you were healthy?”

“Only if you asked me nicely,” he said, but her eyes stayed puzzled and uneasy.

Innocent little thing, he thought with an inward wince.

“Don't worry about it, lass,” he said quietly. “You're fine. I'm not going to hurt you.”

He didn't mention how unlikely it was that he would be able to harm her at all in his present condition, but she didn't look as if she were going to be comforted by that, poor skittish thing. She approached him a little like he imagined she might come close to a biting dog, and it occurred to him to ask about his current bedmate

“And who's this big thing?” Lachlan asked, reaching over to ruffle the dog's ears.

“Oh! That's Remy. And now that you've given him the least amount of affection, he will be your best friend forever.”

“Well, we ought to be on good terms,” he said with a slight smile. “Seeing as we're so close and all.”

He sat up slightly to allow her to pull the blanket off of him, and that was when Lachlan realized that he was entirely naked.

She saw his flinch of surprise, making an apologetic face.

“I'm sorry. Your clothes are there. I'm going to try to rinse them out a little, but they were um... utterly filthy.”

“So you stripped me like a willow,” Lachlan said, trying not to be amused by such a bold action from such a timid girl.

“Er, Sister Anna helped,” she said, but he could still see a rosy red flush on her cheeks as she ran shaky fingers over the bandaged wounds. His body jumped a little when she hit a particularly sensitive spot, but overall, having a pretty young woman tend to his wounds was a fantastic distraction from the pain.

“Normally, I don't let pretty girls handle me so roughly unless we've been properly introduced,” he teased.

She gave him a slightly appalled look.

“I'm not! That is, this isn't...”

“Calm yourself, lass,” Lachlan said with a slight sigh. “I ought not to tease you, should I? You're likely as innocent as a lamb.”

She gave him a faintly frustrated look, which he liked to see. He wasn't actually a bully, and he had started to feel bad about needling her.

“I'm not a baby,” she said indignantly. “I turned nineteen this

past year.”

“Ah. Then surely you're old enough to tell me your name?”

She gave him a frosty look, but he could tell there was a hint of humor behind it, something soft and shy and oddly lovely.

“You sound very much like you are trying to manipulate me,” she said. “I would give it to you if you asked.”

“Ah, well, then. Pretty angel, tell me your name, please.”

“I'm not an angel,” she said, “And my name is...”

She trailed off, and he gave her a curious look. Lachlan remembered with an inward wince how very poorly the world could treat a young woman like this one, and all the reasons why she might want to keep her name to herself.

“It is no matter,” he said, his voice oddly gentle even in his own ears. “It is only the two of us here, and no need for names if you do not wish it.”

“It's Eleanor,” she said quickly, as if she needed to get it over with before she lost her nerve. “Call me Eleanor.”

For some reason, he believed her. She could have lied, and he would have been none the wiser, but there was a kind of truth to it that made him nod.

“Thank you, Eleanor,” he said. “My name is Lachlan.”

She nodded and continued checking his wounds. Her fingers shook a little, but her touch was mostly sure, even if by the end her cheeks were red.

Poor little angel, he thought with a little amusement. *This is not something she is so very used to.*

She drew back with a nod.

“It's fine so far. No fever, no rot. If that continues, you may recover fully.”

“I should hope so. I have a rather lot of business to take care of.” He specifically did not mention that that business included taking revenge on whoever had attacked his war band so badly and left him in this condition. She seemed like she wouldn't appreciate that.

“We'll do our best,” she said encouragingly, and that made him laugh a little.

“We?”

“Well, mostly you, but I'll help.”

She went on about how to keep wounds clean and proper dressing, but at that point, Lachlan was already drifting off, tired as if he had been struck with it. However, he reached out, and when her

fingers brushed against his, he knew that it was fine to go, fine to rest.

CHAPTER 02

Eleanor didn't have any trouble with him until he woke the second time, asking for water. She gave it to him thoughtlessly and then she squawked with dismay when he tried to rise to drink it.

“I can't drink it lying down,” he said reasonably, and she knew that was true. The water would go in his face, except for a few drops that fell into his mouth almost by happenstance.

“Maybe... maybe there are some reeds or straw.”

Lachlan made a face at that.

“Lass, I know I owe you a great deal, but please do not make me put my mouth on months’ old winter straw. That would put me in the ground sooner than the wounds would, don't you think?”

“I could... soak a corner of my handkerchief and let you drink that way,” she suggested. “Remy was the runt, and his mother rejected him. I nursed him all the way until he could eat like that.”

“If I'm going to nurse from you, I won't do it from a handkerchief.”

Eleanor blinked at him in confusion.

He sighed, passing a tired hand over his eyes.

“Never mind, lass. I'm only being foolish. But I do need to drink, so I'll risk sitting up and doing so if...”

He trailed off as she took the small cup from his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Um... I'm sorry. This is going to be a little strange, I think.”

“A little strange?”

Eleanor's cheeks were burning, but she knew that she had to do her best. She was put in charge of this man and his health, and she wouldn't allow anyone to call her careless or derelict in her duty. Still, this was different than just changing bandages, and she took a deep breath.

She took a quick sip of the water and then leaned over him, pressing her lips to his and passing the water to him. Lachlan made a startled noise, and some of the water escaped, but she thought that more went in than out.

Eleanor pulled back to see him looking at her with a shocked expression on his face.

“I did not expect that from you,” he said.

She blushed harder than she had before.

“I... I saw an old woman on my parents' estate do it for her husband. They were very old, and her husband was very sick. He couldn't sit up anymore, so she gave him water like that.”

“Effective,” Lachlan said, licking his lips. “More?”

She jumped a little because somehow she had forgotten that he might want more than a sip.

It's fine. There's nothing untoward about this. This is just the best and only way to get water into him, water that he desperately needs.

She almost believed it, except for the fact that the simple touch of his lips to hers did something to her that she had not expected. She had started to give him water like this, and she was not going to stop, but the tingle that came from the touch of his lips made her squirm a little. It was so much more intimate than she had thought it would be, coming so close that she had to balance herself with her hand on his pallet, bridging over his body.

Eleanor did her best not to push against his wounds, and at some point, he had reached up to wrap a hand around her shoulder,

steadying her.

“Just a little more,” Lachlan murmured.

She nodded, sipping from the cup again.

This time, there was something different about it. She gave him the water, and then, for some reason, she didn't step back right away. She pulled her head back so that their lips no longer touched, but no farther, and she found herself examining his face, fascinated to see someone so closely.

He had a good face. It wasn't handsome like the minstrels liked to sing of, hard and too rough. She noticed a scar that skipped down the right side of his face, thick enough to rise up from his skin. It had spared his eye, and now he could gaze at her with a kind of level curiosity. He had pale green eyes, pale as oak leaves with the sun shining through them, and they were so very beautiful.

“Oh,” she murmured, and the hand that had been on her shoulder came to cup the back of her neck.

She should have been afraid. There was no other proper option for her at that point. She was a cloister girl in a cottage alone with a man who had obviously been in a vicious fight. Even in his wounded state, there was little doubt that he could hurt her if he wanted to. And yet, for some reason, she felt absolutely no fear at all.

Instead, Eleanor trembled as he drew her down for a sweet, deep kiss. The moment their lips touched like this, a shiver coursed through her body, making her whimper a little. It was like being in the field before lightning struck, like learning she was fluent in a language she had never heard before. She should have pulled away in shock and offense, but instead, she stayed right where she was, allowing him to nuzzle his lips against hers, sending a fire she didn't understand straight through her body.

“Oh...” she murmured, and he seemed to take it as permission to press her closer. His lips parted, and she whimpered again when she felt the tip of his tongue sliding along her lips. Eleanor opened her mouth in surprise only to find herself invaded. She had never imagined a man wanting to slide his tongue into her mouth, but now he did so, and her body only wanted to welcome him. It felt good, it felt right, and suddenly it struck her how this must look to someone who saw them, how very wanton she must appear.

“Oh, no, please,” she whimpered, and Lachlan immediately let her go. She moved backward so fast she almost fell on her rear but then she took several steps back to stand on the opposite side of the room, her hands coming up to cover her still-tingling mouth.

“What are you doing?” she asked, aware of the plaintive sound of her own voice.

“I should have thought it was obvious,” Lachlan responded.

“Kissing a pretty girl.”

“What pretty girl?” she almost wailed.

Lachlan gave a brief snort of disbelief.

“You, lass,” he said, and for a moment, she had no idea how to respond to that. It was too confusing, too strange, and all she knew was that she wanted it to happen again.

That is definitely not a thought for a good postulate. She had to squash the thought that she most likely wasn't a very good postulate at all.

Lachlan was watching her closely, and it occurred to her how there was something wolf-like about his watchfulness and the quiet that lived in his motions. He gave her the impression of something that could wait for its answers in the greenwood, silent and powerful.

“Lass, I am sorry,” he said finally.

“You don't look sorry.”

The words were out of Eleanor's mouth before she could think twice, and she moaned a little. No wonder she was so quiet so often. No wonder it was better for her to stay in the background. When she didn't, she said things like this. She expected him to snap at her, but instead, he let out a bark of laughter.

“No, I'm really not.”

When she gave him a confused look, he shook his head with a sigh.

“I'm sorry I frightened you, and before you protest, you look at least alarmed. That was not my intent.”

“What was your intent?” she demanded.

He grinned at her.

“Getting some water.”

“Oh...”

“And then there was a pretty girl bending over me, putting her lips to mine, and I did not think. I only thought about how lovely you are and how good you felt, and the rest... well. It followed naturally, but I should not have done such a thing.”

He considered for a moment and then grinned at her.

“Not without asking, at least.”

“I won't say yes!” she said indignantly, and she had no idea why that won a low laugh from him. There was something sweet and husky about it at once, something that sent a thrill through her just as his kiss had.

“All right, lass. I won't do a thing to you unless you say yes.”

“I won't” she repeated, and Eleanor wondered why there was something half-desperate about the way she spoke then. Something in the very heart of her was taunting her now, making fun, and somewhere, deep inside her, she knew she was a liar.

From the look on Lachlan's face, she thought he knew it, too.

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